

EXPLORING A PILOT PROCESS FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION FROM
CONVERSION TO FRUITFUL MATURITY IN CHRIST

A THESIS

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BY

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DEDICATION

To Uncle Bill who, at 82, has never slowed in his devotion to learning.

Your hunger for knowledge is an inspiration to us all.

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When my fellow classmates and I where challenged to stretch in our choice of a second reader for this research my mind immediately went to Dr. Dwarka Ramphal, then President of my under graduate Alma Mater. I thought Dr. Ramphal would be too busy to entertain the notion of going on this journey with me. I certainly never envisioned that he and I would become close friends and colleagues in the cause of Christ. My friend, Dr. Ron Allison, has provided weekly encouragement and thoughtful insights all along the way. His words have served to keep me inspired to finish the journey.

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the development of six individuals from conversion to fruitful maturity. It was done within the context of a suburban church in Chesapeake, Virginia.

The pilot process utilized for the study was developed for use in that church through anecdotal data and the personal experience of the writer. All six of the participants were interviewed and observed by the researcher over a two-year period.

The investigation showed that each participant did grow toward Christian maturity. The data suggests their spiritual formations toward fruitful maturity can be demonstrated to have followed a being, becoming and doing growth trajectory.

FOREWORD

The year 2000 was a crisis year for me. After 30 years of ministry, including seven years of pastoring historic small-town churches, nine years as a church-planting missionary in the Philippines and eleven years as a suburban church planter, I was exhausted. My state of exhaustion was not physical; it was emotional and spiritual. I was overwhelmed by the tension between the large numbers of people who were coming into the church and the profound shortage of spiritually mature members to care for them. I struggled with the apparent dichotomy between soul winning and spiritual growth.

There were plenty of reasons to consider the church I led to be healthy and strong. Western Branch Community Church had grown, in its first ten years, to well over 1,000 active attenders. Most of that growth had been derived from reaching previously unsaved and unchurched people. There was an abundance of excitement among the members as they gathered for weekly celebration services. The crisis was precipitated by the realization I was pastoring a deeply carnal church.

My discovery didn't come overnight, but it did come to a crisis point one Sunday morning when I saw a female member of the praise team preparing to go onstage to help lead worship. She was attempting to put her name tag on. She couldn't find enough fabric on her blouse to attach the name tag. I asked her put on some additional clothing before going onstage. She accepted my instructive rebuke; her husband was furious. How dare I question her modesty? He thought she looked fine.

After that incident, I started paying closer attention to what our members were saying. I began to realize their expressions were along the lines of, “My life is so much better since I came to this church.” “I am so blessed to have met Pastor Jim.” “Isn’t it exciting to be a part of a church that is growing so fast?” Very few of their testimonials were along the lines of, “My life has changed since I was confronted with the Truth of the Gospel.” “My life is better since I met Jesus Christ.” “What a joy to see God at work in our lives and those of others around us.” I had to accept that a huge percentage of our members had never grown beyond the spiritual infancy that marked their lives when they came.

The crisis sent me on an introspective journey. I began to realize an internal tension that had existed throughout my entire ministry. There seemed to be a choice I constantly had to make. The mission was clear: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20 NIV). The tension was around the question, “Do I focus on the front end of the mission or the back end?” In other words, “Do I focus my leadership energies on the ‘go and make disciples’ aspect of the mission or on the ‘teach them to obey’ part?” It seemed to me, when I focused on “go,” there was little depth of maturity among the church’s members. When I focused on “teach,” newcomers to the Kingdom slowed to a trickle. This was not a new discovery for me. My answer had always been to shift back and forth between the two. There I was in the year 2000 having focused almost exclusively on the front part, knowing I had to make the shift again. The crisis was

my unwillingness to stop doing the work of an evangelist, even though I knew I had to pastor the flock which God had entrusted to me.

My introspection eventually led to research. I soon realized I was not the only church leader grappling with the issue. It seemed that many writers approached the conundrum the same way I had been approaching it—by choosing between the two. If the author's inclination was discipleship he made a case for "teach." If his inclination was toward evangelism he made a case for "go." I even discovered theological terms had been coined like Centripetalism vs. Centrifugalism for those who choose inreach vs. outreach.

I concluded that Western Branch Community Church needed a different leader. I decided to resign as Senior Pastor. The elders of the church asked me not to do so. My mentor, Dr. Herbert Carter, told me the better alternative was to become the kind of leader the church needed. I knew if I was going to stay in the Senior Pastor role, I had to resolve this tension internally; I had to grow personally. It was that realization that ultimately led me to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary's Doctor of Ministries in Christian Leadership program.

The first book I was assigned to read in the program opened my eyes to the world of systems thinking. Before that time, I had always believed evangelism and discipleship were in tension with one another. It never occurred to me they were both parts of a complete system. The solution wasn't a choice between the two; it was the development of a complete system that treated them both as parts of a continuum in a given believer's life.

Entering my first D. Min. residency opened my eyes to a second powerful concept. True discipleship can be characterized as happening along a conceptual framework of “Being (salvation), Becoming (discipleship), and Doing (service). My professors did not present these as elements from which church leaders must chose. They presented them as one way of viewing the spiritual formation continuum as a complete system.

Those two discoveries created a fresh energy in me to lead. They challenged me to develop a system for use in our context that would facilitate growth along that continuum.

This study was an exploration into whether the four primary elements that grew out of that challenge were working holistically to facilitate spiritual formation all the way from conversion to fruitful maturity in Christ in the lives of our church members. The four primary elements were: 1) A small group setting where trust relationships form; 2) an assessment process designed to provide insights into an individual member’s progress; 3) a control mechanism intended to minimize inevitable self-assessment bias; and, 4) a goal setting process intended to inspire continued movement toward fruitful maturity in Christ.

This exploration into the pilot program helped our church leaders to hone our system. It exposed areas of strength as well as areas that needed improvement. This document explores those discoveries and the journey to make them. The tools and processes described in this study are not presented as rigorously tested instruments or mechanisms. They are merely the tools and processes we have developed in our context to help our members.

This study investigates the process of reaching the unchurched and bringing them to maturity through small group interaction, personal assessment and goal setting dynamics. The system is simple. Each individual who comes to faith in Christ is challenged to join one of the church's small group for discipleship. In time, he is trained to lead a small group, at which time he becomes a group leader who leads others to faith in Christ and disciples them in their faith. This is described as the systemic process of bringing the unconverted to faith and the new believer to fruitful maturity.

My prayer for you as a reader is that you will go beyond considering the adoption of the system described. Rather, you will be challenged to do the hard work of systems-thinking in your context. My deep desire is that we, the Church, become as effective as we can be in going into all the world to make disciples of Jesus Christ and that we, with equal success, teach them to obey all our Lord has commanded us.

CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM

The Church Has a Bi-Dimensional Mission

The mission of the church is clearly delineated by Jesus himself and recorded by Matthew. “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).¹ Those words present two primary elements in the mission; i.e. “Go make disciples” and “teach them to obey.” The full mandate then, is to help unbelievers connect with God through salvation in Christ and to assist these young believers to grow to maturity in Christ.

The American Church Appears to Be Failing in Both Dimensions

Barna suggests the church is struggling on both counts. He says, “The Christian Church is failing to live up to its [call]; we’re not even coming close to fulfilling it. Our nation has a strong economy but a weak morality. People are more interested in faith and religion than in Jesus. Believers are largely indistinguishable from nonbelievers in how they think and live.”²

¹ All Scripture references are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

² George Barna, *Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 11.

Barna posits that not only has the church failed to go and make disciples, it is actually losing ground. He writes, “The church has lost its place at the table of cultural influence.”³ His published research seems to support his position. He estimates that on a typical Sunday morning less than 100 million Americans, which currently represents less than 37% of the American population, attend church⁴ and “91% of all American non-Christians consider Protestant churches to be insensitive to their needs.”⁵

Rainer agrees. He says, “More has been written on the unchurched in America in the past fifteen years than in any similar period in history. Yet with all the research and publications, the percentage of unchurched in our nation continues to increase.”⁶ He proposes the American church has been ineffective at winning the lost. He equally believes it has failed to bring those who have been reached into Christ-like maturity.

The church’s failure to fulfill the “teach them” aspect of the mission has resulted in churches populated with people virtually ignorant of biblical truth. In a recent volume Barna reports that forty-seven percent of Americans, who define

³ Ibid.

⁴ George Barna, *The Barna Report 1992-1993* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993), 89.

⁵ Ibid., 69.

⁶ Thom Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2001), 51.

themselves as born-again Christians, no longer believe absolute truth exists.⁷ Fifty-five percent of American church attenders reported rarely, if ever, reading the Bible.⁸

The problem is compounded by the reality that many who do have a church background struggle to trust modern church leaders. This is a recurring theme among many of the formerly unchurched people that have come to the church described in this research. Sixty percent of the church's more than 2,000 regular attenders report having been unchurched⁹ before coming. Ninety percent of this previously unchurched group report having some Christian church background. The average respondent reports having been unchurched for twelve years. The majority of that group report having dropped out of the church as a result of hurts inflicted at the hands of church leaders.¹⁰ One conversation with a church member was axiomatic. He said, "After that last encounter [in a local church] I decided I would never darken the door of another church."

Leading people to a personal faith in Christ and the subsequent internalization of biblical values requires huge amounts of trust. This reality suggests two things; first, church leaders must make being trustworthy a high priority; second, churches must develop trust environments where the mission can be fulfilled on a deeply personal level.

⁷ George Barna, *What Americans Believe: An Annual Survey of Values and Religious View in the United States* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), 85.

⁸ Ibid., 288.

⁹ WBCC defines an unchurched person as anyone who has not been actively involved in a church during the 12 months before coming to WBCC. Minimal active involvement is defined as regular attendance in Sunday services.

¹⁰ Statistics were derived from an informal congregational survey done in the fall of 2004 among the congregants of WBCC.

Understanding the Scope of the Problem

If the American church is going to fulfill the Lord's mandate, it must realize this is the context into which it has been sent. Anderson says, "Many of the sincere and committed Christians who still faithfully fill the family pews hold on to the nostalgic hope that tomorrow will be yesterday."¹¹ The reality is that the culture around us has changed. Anderson writes,

First century Christians had to deal with a totally pagan culture. The world they lived in and sought to evangelize had never heard of Jesus Christ and knew nothing about the Judeo-Christian God and religion. For most of the 20th Century, American Churches and Christians have lived in the midst of a pre-evangelized culture. The majority of the people we have tried to evangelize have had some kind of religious background and were at least familiar with basic Christian ideas and vocabulary. Now the situation is rapidly changing. Millions of Americans have never been to church, never owned a Bible, and have no interest in, nor sense of need for religion. Evangelism becomes extremely difficult when Christians in our pluralistic society limit their association and activities to those who share their Christian beliefs and lifestyles. They don't have friends who are totally secular; they don't belong to the same clubs, share the same interest, or even converse with them at any length. If Christians and the church are to become effective in reaching these modern pagans, we will need to go to them. In other words, we have to change the starting point of evangelism. We need to start where they are instead of where we are.¹²

This is not to say the American public is cold to spiritual matters. There is an evident hunger for spiritual experiences among the population surrounding the church described in this research. It is an easy thing, in this age of faith and spirituality, to find people who desire help from God and who are willing to communicate a desire

¹¹ Leith Anderson, *Dying for Change* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1990), 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 134.

to establish a relationship with Christ.¹³ The difficult work of the church is leading those people to a genuine life-changing relationship with Christ that leads to fruitful maturity in Christ and includes an internalized biblical worldview.

Given the 21st century reality of America's state of relative biblical illiteracy and general mistrust of church leaders, how does the church move beyond the collecting of commitments all the way to the making of disciples? How do church members become more than attenders of dynamic celebrations and Christian entertainment and become fully mature followers of Christ? How do congregants know whether they are growing when they often don't know enough about the Christian faith to chart a course toward personal maturation? Klipowicz observes, "The church must learn ways to reach the lost and bring believers to fruitful maturity in Christ."¹⁴

Senge posits that real solutions require a holistic approach to evaluating and understanding the full scope of the problem. He says, "At the heart of a learning organization is a shift of mind—from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something 'out there' to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience."¹⁵ He illustrates that principle vividly when he writes,

A cloud masses, the sky darkens, leaves twist upward, and we know that it will rain. We also know that after the storm, the runoff will feed

¹³ More than 10,000 people have completed visitor cards in the 15 year history of WBCC declaring that they were committing their lives to Christ.

¹⁴ Steven Klipowicz (Faculty, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary), in discussion with the author, November 2007.

¹⁵ Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Currency Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1960), 12-13.

into groundwater miles away, and the sky will grow clear by tomorrow. All these events are distant in time and space, and yet they are all connected within the same pattern. Each has an influence on the rest, an influence that is usually hidden from view. You can only understand the system of a rainstorm by contemplating the whole, not any individual part of the pattern.¹⁶

If the American church is going to apply that sensitivity to the solving of its problem, it will have to take an honest look at its audience and at itself. It is theorized that the local church's failure to take Senge's systems-thinking approach to finding solutions in its unique setting, that has exacerbated the problem. Ramphal fears, "the church has failed to learn how to learn from its constituents and is rapidly becoming irrelevant."¹⁷

Finding a solution will require church members and leaders to move beyond the simplistic approach to the problem of dismissing any responsibility they might have. Conversations with church members over the years reveal that attitude in expressions like, "There is something wrong with unchurched people. If not, they would come to church."

The solution is not another church-growth conference either. The landscape is filled with well-attended conferences and seminars on church growth. All too often the result of attending one of these well-funded and presented conferences is the momentary excitement of seeing what might be, followed by the long discouragement of seeing yet another model fail when tried to be duplicated at home.

Rainer says,

¹⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹⁷ Dwarka Ramphal, (President, Heritage Bible College), in discussion with the author, February 2004.

Unfortunately, numerous church leaders have decided that it is the methodological model of Willow Creek that [has brought success] rather than the philosophical commitment to reach the unchurched in their context. The methods used [at Willow Creek] probably would have proven highly ineffective in...Kentucky and...Memphis. But they may have been effective...in Detroit.¹⁸

Church leaders can learn from what other effective churches are doing to reach unchurched people in their environment. They can also study examples of churches who are assisting new believers to grow into fruitfully mature followers of Christ. However, effective holistic ministry requires the hard work of learning the principles behind the models and applying them to each unique ministry setting.

The church's failure to take a holistic, systems-wide approach to finding solutions has produced a reality in which "an estimated 85% of America's Protestant churches are either stagnating or dying."¹⁹ The church in America is not only failing to fulfill our Lord's mandate to make disciples, it is dying.

Some Churches are Taking a Systems-Thinking Approach

Several growing churches have begun to realize this lack of systems-thinking toward solving the problem. They have begun to address the need by focusing more on the interconnectedness of the seeming dichotomy; i.e. whether to focus on the "go" aspect of the Great Commission or the "teach" aspect. They are beginning to understand the need to do the hard work of introspection and reengineering to meet their respective communities where they are. They are attempting to develop systems

¹⁸ Rainer, 38.

¹⁹ Anderson, 9.

that genuinely engage unchurched, unsaved people at their current points of spiritual need. They are equally committed to helping biblically uninformed church members grow toward maturity in Christ. They are doing the work of honestly evaluating their own effectiveness (or lack thereof) in their own environments at fulfilling the Lord's entire command. They are beginning to understand these two aspects of the Great Commission are not dichotomous but, are a continuum in a believer's life that must be viewed as an entire system.

Willow Creek Community Church is the second largest church in America.²⁰ It has a well-documented history of reaching irreligious people with the gospel message. The church's growth rate was virtually unprecedented for many years growing from a small handful of teenagers to an average weekend attendance approaching 20,000. The success of its spiritual formation process was measured by that growth. The theory was, if it is growing it must be working. Their approach has been studied by thousands of churches around the world.²¹

In 2003, Willow Creek leaders decided to ask a profound question about themselves. Hawkins writes, "Our research goal was daunting, but simple. We wanted to find evidence of spiritual growth in our people, and then figure out what types of activities or circumstances triggered that spiritual growth. An increasing love

²⁰ Ed Stetzer, "2007 Outreach Magazine Report: 100 Largest U. S. Churches" (Vista, CA: *Outreach, Inc.*, 2007), 52-53.

²¹ As of this writing the Willow Creek Association reports more than 10,000 member churches.

for God and for other people was our working definition of spiritual growth. We based this definition on Jesus' description of the two greatest commandments."²²

This research led Willow Creek's leadership to commission one of the most aggressive self-studies in modern church history. Research was done among 14,000 of the church's current attendees and five hundred of their former attendees.²³ Their research revealed several shocking realities. Perhaps the most profound discovery was that the processes into which they had been investing millions of dollars and tens of thousands of man-hours was not producing spiritually mature believers. It was accomplishing the "go" portion of the Great Commission. It was even increasing attendees' levels of activity in the church. There was no significant correlation between spiritual maturity and increased activity.²⁴ They found that the people who were growing to maturity were also the most vulnerable to leaving the church."²⁵ The conclusion of that research led church leaders to ask, "Can Willow Change?"²⁶

Willow Creek leaders have begun to make sweeping changes in the type of weekend services they provide. They have reengineered their approach to small group dynamics and to the level of activity expected of members.²⁷ Why are they committed to change? Hawkins writes, "We discovered that higher levels of church

²² Greg Hawkins, Cathy Parkinson, and Eric Arnson, *Reveal: Where are You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow, 2007), 29.

²³ Gene Appel, "Can Willow Change?" (lecture, A2 Conference, Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, IL, October 14, 2006).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

activity did not predict increasing love for God or increasing love for other people.”²⁸

This strongly suggests that Willow Creek Community Church’s allegiance is not to the methodological approach they have employed through the years. It is to being the most effective they can be in the fulfillment of both aspects of the Lord’s mandate.

They are taking a systems-thinking approach to their unique setting. They are finding solutions and embracing change. They are seeing results. Appel reports they have performed “more baptisms in the past year than in any of the six previous years.”²⁹

He equally reports the church has more people involved in serving others, growing from a few hundred six years ago, to well over 10,000 in 2006.³⁰ This, when added to increases in the members’ subjective assessments of their love for God, suggests they are beginning to successfully balance their energies between both aspects of the mandate.

Southeast Christian Church of Louisville, Kentucky is another of America’s largest churches. The church entered a major season of change during 2006 with the retirement of their Senior Minister Bob Russell. During Pastor Russell’s thirty-year tenure the church grew from 300 to nearly 20,000. After a gradual transition period of several years, Associate Minister Dave Stone took on the responsibilities of Senior Minister. He immediately cast an aggressive vision for the future. His vision calls for dramatically reducing the number of activities and programs in which church members are engaged. It focuses their efforts on reaching their community for Christ

²⁸ Hawkins, Parkinson, Arnson, 35.

²⁹ Appel.

³⁰ Ibid.

and clearly defining simple processes for developing fully mature followers of Christ. This fresh vision is built on their understanding of the changing demographic and spiritual climate in Louisville and its surrounding populations.³¹ Southeastern Christian Church's commitment is not to the maintenance of established modes of ministry. It is to taking a systemic approach to both aspects of our Lord's mandate in their context.

These influential ministries understand the mandate. They understand that we live in changing times in which contexts are not static. They understand effectiveness in the mandate requires a thorough understanding of their unique contexts and the unique characteristics of their constituent populations. They understand the message presented must be consistent with the Word of God while the methods utilized are contextualized to their settings. They understand this process requires an ongoing commitment to evaluation and adjustment.

The solution for every local church is not the copying of one of these models. It requires understanding the goal and applying these principles in each unique setting. Rainer reports after doing research among 50,000 churches, "the healthiest churches in America tended to have a simple process for making disciples. They had clarity about the process. They moved Christians intentionally through the process. They were focused on the elements of the process. And they aligned their entire congregation to this process."³²

³¹ "The Southeast Outlook" (Louisville: Southeast Christian Church, January 6, 2006 issue).

³² Eric Geiger and Thom Rainer, *Simple Church* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), ix.

Western Branch Community Church makes an ideal case study for the above stated premise since it has made a concerted attempt to develop a unique model for spiritual formation, from conversion to fruitful maturity, in way that is biblically sound and yet unique to its setting. Its process is built on the premise that spiritual growth is integrated and consequently requires a holistic, systemic process from pre-conversion to fruitful maturity in Christ.

Introducing Western Branch Community Church's Approach

Western Branch Community Church (WBCC) is a suburban church plant started in September of 1989. Its published goal has been to derive its primary growth from the unsaved, unchurched population around it.³³ It was launched by way of a telemarketing campaign designed to identify unchurched people and extend invitations only to that segment of the population. During the weeks leading up to the first service of the church, a team of volunteers called 20,000 homes in its constituent area. Callers asked residents whether they were currently active in an area church. If they were active, the caller asked the respondent to pray for the new church getting started and quickly concluded the call. If respondents identified themselves as unchurched they were given the opportunity receive mail describing the new church forming. One thousand, nine-hundred and five families fit the description and requested the mailings. The final mailing was an invitation to the first public

³³ WBCC's vision is to be a place where fully-devoted followers of Christ provide help and hope to the hurting unchurched of Hampton Roads and beyond. Its mission is to help unchurched people connect with God and his church, grow to maturity, find their niche in the Body of Christ and eventually lead others to do the same.

gathering of the church. One hundred and sixty-five people came to that event.

Based on an informal survey distributed that morning, eighty-nine percent of those attending identified themselves as unchurched before that day.

As of this writing well over 2,000 people are considered regular attenders at the church's Sunday morning services. The first ministry initiative of the new church, beyond the Sunday morning celebration service, was the launching of small home-based groups. These groups came to be known as community groups and became the basic spiritual family units of the church. Today, more than 1,000 church members meet during the week in one of the eighty community groups that meet around the area. Sixty percent of church members identify themselves as having been unchurched before uniting with the church family.³⁴ A large percentage of members have had no discernable biblical training and continue to describe their greatest spiritual deficit as a lack of biblical knowledge.³⁵

This contextual reality led church leaders to posit that they were relatively effective at the "go" aspect of the mission but were failing to accomplish the "teach" aspect. Church leaders set a goal to learn all they could about the church's constituents and to develop a process designed to affect spiritual formation employing a systems-thinking approach to the process, the goal being to design a process that encompassed both of the above mentioned dynamics; i.e. "go" and "teach." The deep desire was to create a system that affected spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity

³⁴ Based on a congregational survey done in October 2004 coupled with data gathered monthly during the new members' orientation seminar.

³⁵ This statement has not been statistically established but is generally accepted among leaders and members as indicated anecdotally.

without diminishing the church's apparent effectiveness at reaching unsaved people with the Gospel.

The development of this pilot process began around a conceptual framework that emphasized these holistic interconnected dimensions of formation. Connecting to God and His family, growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ and serving others as you are being served was employed as the rubric which defined the church's mission statement. This conceptual framework was adopted after the being exposed to a similar rubric during Doctor of Ministries residencies at the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; i.e. being, becoming and doing.

The dynamic trajectory of being, becoming and doing is said to be highly descriptive of the journey an individual goes through in coming to faith in Christ, growing to maturity in Christ and finding an appropriate place of service in the Body of Christ. According to Laniak these three dynamics can be described in myriad ways, some of which are presented in the table below.

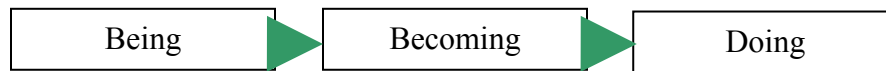
Table 1. Interchangeable Terms for the Being, Becoming, Doing Rubric³⁶

Being:	Becoming:	Doing:
Upward	Inward/ Onward	Outward
Identity = Who?	Development = What?	Effectiveness = How?
Ortho-ontology	Ortho-doxy	Ortho-praxis
Existential	Epistemological	Axiological/Axiomatic
Calling	Character	Competence
Heart	Mind	Hand
Priest	Prophet	King
Presence of God	Word of God	Reign of God
Confession	Exhortation	Administration
Salvation	Sanctification	Serving

³⁶ Tim Laniak, "Orientation," (lecture, D. Min. Residency, Christian Leadership, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC.), 2003.

Laniak suggests that the dynamics of these three primary elements can be seen as a continuum in a person's spiritual journey as depicted in the diagram below.

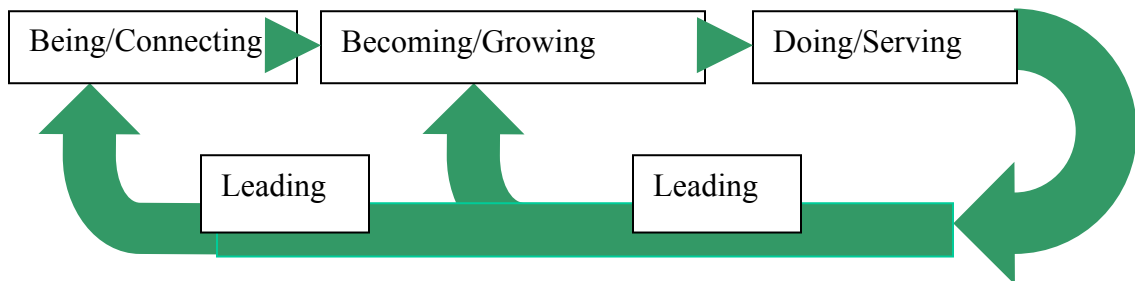
Figure 1. Being, Becoming, Doing Depicted as a Continuum



The spiritual journey begins when an unsaved person comes to faith in Christ and into relationship with the body of Christ (being). It continues as he commits himself to grow toward fruitful maturity in Christ (becoming). It continues as he discovers a sense of calling to a suitable area of service (doing) in the body of Christ.

These three dynamics closely resemble those utilized by WBCC as depicted in Figure 2 below. A fourth dynamic—leading—brings the continuum full circle as believers assist others in their journey of *being/connecting*, *becoming/growing* and *doing/serving*.

Figure 2. Being, Becoming, Doing Juxtaposed with WBCC's Mission



This research project was designed to explore whether the pilot process developed by WBCC would be useful in assisting church members in their respective growth along this continuum. The primary research approach lay around mini-case studies of six participants considered to be typical WBCC attenders. The participants were carefully chosen so that they represented a cross section of church attenders

from pre-conversion to a high level of maturity in Christ. The case studies were exploratory in nature and designed to examine the systemic nature of the phenomenon from conversion to fruitful maturity. Since it was a pilot investigation, the exploratory study included much anecdotal information drawn from experience and observation of the phenomenon over the past decade. A hybrid process was developed to ascertain both qualitative and quantitative data meaningful to the exploration.

Qualitative data was included because spiritual formation to fruitful maturity is often considered a highly personalized process. As described in the Willow Creek research, true spiritual formation involves growth in loving God and loving people. That type of spiritual formation, while more difficult to measure, is much more genuinely life changing than that of drawing people into specific Christian activities. Involvement in church activities alone does not distinguish whether participants have truly internalized biblical values or they have merely been indoctrinated in the church's approach to ministry. The goal of spiritual formation is much deeper than indoctrination in specific Christian values and activities. Spiritual formation is about integration. Spiritual formation is about transformation. Palmer writes, "To integrate faith, learning, and life means to develop for oneself a thoroughly Christian way of thinking about, and responding to, issues and all kinds of life-situations. It means developing a distinctively Christian perspective on all matters of faith, all modes of inquiry and all of the profound questions life evokes."³⁷ Palmer rightly asserts,

When we speak of faith making an evident difference in how we think and express ourselves, we mean more than simply being able to state our beliefs clearly and succinctly. Indoctrination can achieve these results. But integration and indoctrination are not at all the same. Indoctrination seeks unquestioning acceptance of answers developed

³⁷ Mike Palmer, *Elements of a Christian Worldview* (Springfield: Logion Press, 1998), 13.

by someone else, usually an authority figure. Indoctrination, even when well intentioned, inhibits the assumption of responsibility, because it restricts the questioning process which forms the basis of all sound decision-making. Integration, even when difficult and painful, promotes mature faith, because it involves assessing competing ideas and seeks to understand how the Christian faith speaks to such ideas.³⁸

This type of transformation may be measured quantitatively, but since the study is in its formative stages, a qualitative study is preferable so as to determine the issues involved in the phenomenon of conversion to fruitful maturity. This approach is not best measured quantitatively at this stage. The best measure is a qualitative evaluation of persons who have submitted themselves to the process. According to Yin, "...case studies are the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real life context"³⁹ Such is the dynamic of the case studies built around the representative group interviewed in this research project.

Quantitative data does have a role in research of this type. A key dynamic of the assessment process is the establishment of benchmarks along the journey toward fruitful maturity. Given the highly subjective nature of qualitative data, some quantitative data is helpful in demonstrating movement (or lack thereof) along the path toward maturity in Christ. The benchmarks in this pilot program however were established by way of arbitrary measurement tools developed as a result of thirty-six years of pastoral experience. These benchmarks led to the model being developed and used in this study.

³⁸ Ibid., 14.

³⁹ Robert Yin, *Case Study Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), 1.

Formal and informal personal interviews, group interactions, observation and anecdotal information are all used in this study to ascertain the qualitative and quantitative information posited. The following research questions guided the inquiry:

- What is Christian maturity?
- What is the biblical framework for Christian maturity?
- How is Christian maturity evaluated and measured?
- What is the role of small groups in spiritual formation at WBCC?
- Will individual participants submit to personal assessment of their current level of maturity. If so, will these individuals submit to a control mechanism designed to minimize the bias often accompanied by self-assessment?
- Will individual participants set personal goals toward spiritual maturity? If so, will those goals facilitate growth toward fruitful maturity in Christ?

The Research Setting

This research was done in the suburban environ of Chesapeake, Virginia, specifically among a select group of WBCC congregants. At the time of this writing, WBCC was an 18-year old church, planted and led by this writer, committed to a documented vision of deriving its primary growth from the unchurched populations around it.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Jim Wall, "Evaluating the Mind-Set of a Congregation Committed to Reaching Unchurched People" (Project One, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2003), 3.

The research was intended to explore the effectiveness of a pilot program designed specifically for this context and was done through a hand-selected representative group. This representative group was composed of six adults who completed a survey and fit the profile of the typical attender (as described in Chapter 4). Each participant agreed to become part of a weekly home group for the duration of the research project. This home group utilized a variety of biblically-based Christian discipleship materials over a period of two years.

The primary objective of the weekly small-group gathering was to establish a trust environment in which meaningful evaluation could take place. Each participant agreed to assess his progress periodically by means of a prescribed assessment tool. Each participant also agreed to be interviewed, formally and informally, following each assessment. The interview was intended to provide a control mechanism designed to minimize the subjective bias often associated with self-assessment. Each participant also agreed to set personal spiritual growth goals designed to facilitate personal spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity.

The Significance of This Study

This research project is deemed to be significant for three primary reasons.

The research is based in the conviction that any model for spiritual formation to fruitful maturity must be evaluated for effectiveness in the given contextual setting. Every setting is unique; therefore, effective models must be tailored to the setting to which they are applied. This research was done to explore the effectiveness of a pilot

process that, once tested by means of this research, would potentially be made available to entire WBCC church family.

Another significance lies in the exploration of the unique Christian Maturity Assessment Tool.⁴¹ This tool was developed for use in the WBCC context as an aid for members in having an indicator of their current spiritual maturity. The tool provided for personal introspection, mentor affirmation, measurable levels of achievement, specific categories to address in the growth process and goal setting as a mechanism for future growth. To date, no such inclusive instrument has been found in Christian literature. The instrument has not been submitted to rigorous academic standards. However, the assessment concepts are deemed to have potential value to the greater body of Christ and will be made available to quantitative analysts who may desire to further test the validity and reliability of the measurement tool as well as the entire pilot process.

Finally, because the church has made a systematic effort to develop a unique process for a unique setting, this research provides an example of the types of elements that might go into any given setting. It is hoped that other churches will be inspired to create pilot programs in their own settings and in so doing, add to this body of literature.

Limitations of the Study and Definition of Terms

The study is exploratory and the measurement tools used in this study are not validated as yet, nor is scientific reliability established. Further studies may lead to

⁴¹ Attached as Appendix Two

testing their validity and reliability. Those studies may also lead to further refinement of the tools. At the time of this writing, they were developed internally by the pastor of WBCC and found sufficient to fulfill the needs of the congregation. Further work is being done constantly to perfect the model used.

Throughout the study certain terms are used to connote the following:

- *Centrifugalism and Centripetalism* are terms used to depict the tension between evangelism and discipleship, respectively, as the primary modus of a given church context.
- *Holistic, systemic ministry* is a way of viewing spiritual formation that includes a broad spectrum look at a given disciples' journey from conversion to fruitful maturity in Christ.
- *Systemic Approach* is a way of viewing a problem that assesses all aspects of it before formulating solutions. It is looking at the effects of any action on the system as a whole.
- *Being, becoming, doing* is a rubric presented at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary as a conceptual framework for spiritual formation.
- *Connecting, growing, serving* is WBCC's application of the being, becoming, doing rubric.
- *Infant, adolescent, adult, and parent* are terms utilized in the WBCC pilot process to describe four primary stages of development in a given Christian's life. These terms are more fully defined in Chapter Two of this document.
- *Spiritual formation to fruitful maturity* is an expression formulated to represent a holistic conceptual framework for the spiritual maturation process

beginning at the point of salvation and ranging all the way to maturity sufficient to assist seekers and young believers in their respective spiritual formation processes.

- *Sodality* is a term used in this research to describe a small group of people in a relational environment where trust is developed and a mutual commitment to Christian maturity is embraced.
- *Modality* is a term used to describe the methods and processes designed to therapeutically help one another in assessing their current levels of Christian maturity, isolate specific areas in which to grow, develop personal spiritual goals designed to facilitate that growth and assist one another in the fulfillment of those goals.
- *Affirmation Meeting* is a term used to describe the post self-assessment interview designed to minimize personal bias. The conclusions reached after applying this control mechanism are deemed to have more credibility than those reached through self-testing alone.

A Preview of the Remaining Chapters

Chapter Two presents a biblical framework for the spiritual formation process from conversion to fruitful maturity utilized in this study. It includes a description of WBCC's unique ecclesiological assumptions that inform its understanding of spiritual formation. The intent of the chapter is to define the biblical framework for WBCC's pilot process for spiritual formation; within its Pentecostal/Evangelical context.

Chapter Three introduces the reader to the study's assumptions on the nature of maturation. The chapter describes the four primary elements of the pilot program

being explored. It defines the markers utilized in measuring maturity in the pilot program, explains the dynamics of the assessment tool utilized to exact those measurements and provides a basis for the setting of systematic goals toward maturation.

Chapter Four introduces the evaluation processes utilized in the study. It exposes the selection process for the representative group. It examines the approach utilized for data gathering, as well as the efforts made to minimize subjective bias.

Chapter Five presents the six mini-case studies mentioned above, utilizing data collected from two assessments—one year apart—done by each participant. It includes data gathered from a post-research discussion of all six participants. It tells each participant's spiritual formation story from the conceptual framework of *being/connect*, *becoming/grow* and *doing/serve*.

Chapter Six presents conclusions drawn from the research. It exposes areas for improvement in light of the research, as well as other learnings derived from the project. It concludes with future plans for widening the scope of the research process to include the entire WBCC congregation.

CHAPTER 2

A BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION FROM CONVERSION TO FRUITFUL MATURITY

Leading the lost to find Christ and providing a subsequent discipleship process that leads to fruitful maturity constitutes two primary dynamics of the Great Commission. Barna, Rainer, Peters, Warren, Wagner, Packer et. al. lament the state of the lost, as well as the paucity of effort made to win them to Christ and bring them to fruitful maturity. Chapter One introduced a continuum as a holistic, systemic approach to spiritual formation that encompasses the full spectrum from conversion to full maturity in Christ. That continuum was presented in three sets of virtually interchangeable terms.¹ Each set of terms represents one of three major portions of the continuum. The first set of terms includes *being/connect* as a way of referencing the conversion experience. The second set of terms includes *becoming/grow* as a way of referencing a believer's growth toward maturity. The third set of terms includes *doing/serve* as a way of referencing the process of finding one's divinely ordained area of service in the body of Christ.

This chapter presents a biblical framework for the believer's call to grow along that continuum. It adds to the above terms a modus for elucidating the continuum in human development terms: i.e. infant, adolescent and adult. A fourth dynamic of human development is added to the conversation, i.e. parent. For the purposes of this research, *parent* is a metaphorical term used to describe an adult believer who has embraced the role of sharing his faith with lost souls and providing

¹ These terms are listed in Table 1, Figure 1 and Figure 2 of this document.

discipleship for young believers. These *parent* believers view the primary goal of their own maturation as preparation for assisting infant believers to *be/connect*, *become/grow*, *do/serve* and, in due time, *parent* others. This creates a maturation cycle that perpetuates the mission for coming generations.

This chapter also presents a Christian character trait rubric. These character traits are presented as the areas of belief and behavior in which followers of Christ should aspire to mature. The Sermon on the Mount—the central sermon of Jesus’ time on Earth—is reviewed as the basis for these character traits. The above described continuum juxtaposed with these character traits is the basis for the pilot process described in the subsequent chapters of this document and explored in this research.

The primary modus for this biblical framework is based in a Matthean understanding of spiritual formation. It was Matthew who recorded Jesus’ words described as the Great Commission. It was Matthew who captured, in the most concise form, Jesus’ quintessential sermon on Christian character. It is the character traits enumerated in that sermon that form the basis for the categories in the assessment tool utilized in the pilot process being explored in this research. The Gospel of Matthew virtually provides a manual for spiritual formation that encompasses the full continuum and serves as the foundation for the pilot process being explored. Klipowicz says, “Matthew is a virtual owner’s manual for spiritual formation.”²

² Steven Klipowicz (Faculty, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary), in discussion with the author, November 2007.

Christian Maturity Described in Human Development Terms

Matthew's sensibilities toward spiritual formation are described in detail later in this chapter. It is believed that, before the process of spiritual formation can be explored, the responsibilities of church leaders to provide a meaningful process must be understood. That sense of responsibility must be accompanied by a conceptual framework for the spiritual trajectory along which believers must traverse. Paul presents a glimpse into both understandings in one passage. He writes, "It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Ephesians 4:11–16).

Paul begins the passage by establishing that there are some people called and gifted by God to "*prepare the saints.*" The five mentioned gifts—apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher—have constituted many studies through the centuries. It is stipulated, for the purposes of this research there are some individuals called to provide the leadership needed in the church. That is not to say this group of leaders is

an elite cadre. Simpson writes, “The New Testament affords no hint of a priestly caste...but the universal priesthood of believers, each occupying his proper place in the body of Christ, has its clear authorization. In the theocracy of grace there is in fact no laity.”³ It is presupposed that every believer has the potential to join the ranks of those gifted to lead.

The second concept in Paul’s anthology suggests a trajectory along which believers traverse in their spiritual formation. He writes, “...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ...” (Ephesians 4:14). The implication is there are levels of unity, faith and knowledge to which a given believer should aspire, the end goal being to reach full, Christ-like maturity.

The word translated *mature* in the NIV and *perfect* in the KJV is the Greek word *teleios* (τέλειος) which carries with it the idea of being full grown. Wuest writes, “The meaning of the word [teleios] includes the ideas of full-growth, maturity, workability, soundness and completeness. In the pagan Greek mystery religions the word referred to those devotees who were fully instructed as opposed to those who were novices.”⁴

The word *teleios* is found throughout the New Testament record referring to this phenomena. The Hebrew writer set the words *teleios* and *nepios* in contrast with one another in chapter five of his writings. He writes, “Anyone who lives on milk,

³ E. K. Simpson and F.F. Bruce, *Commentary of the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 95.

⁴ Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament for the English Reader*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1940), 114.

being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:13-14). As regards this passage Wuest writes, “The word ‘babe’ is from *nepios*, a Greek word meaning ‘an infant, little child, a minor, not of age’ and in a metaphorical sense ‘untaught, unskilled.’ The word *teleios* therefore when used of a Christian, describes him as spiritually mature.”⁵

The Apostle Paul also utilizes the word *teleios* frequently in his writings.⁶ In writing to the church at Corinth, Paul presents the same conclusion as the Hebrew writer utilizing the same words to create a similar contrast. He writes, “For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways” (1 Corinthians 13:9-11 RSV). This, along with other Pauline passages cited below clearly delineates Paul’s understanding of Christian maturity in human development terms.

A Matthean understanding of spiritual formation implies agreement with the above mentioned writers. Matthew uses the word *teleios* in similar fashion. Matthew records the words of Jesus telling believers, “You, therefore, must be perfect [*teleios*], as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48 RSV). Since his followers were far from full maturity at this stage of their development, Jesus’ words clearly denote a call to grow from their present state until full maturity is achieved. In chapter

⁵ Ibid., 114.

⁶ Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 13:10, Ephesians 4:13, and Colossians 1:28.

nineteen, verse twenty-one Matthew records the words of Jesus explaining to believers both the cost and the value of this journey toward full maturity. “Jesus said to him, ‘If you would be perfect [*teleios*], go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me’” (RSV).

Given the understanding of maturity as a process of moving from infancy to full growth, it is deemed appropriate to add a set of terms to the continuum presented in Chapter One, i.e. *being/connect*, *becoming/grow*, *doing/serve*. This set of terms describes the spiritual formation process in human development terms. For the purposes of this study there are four milestones in the maturation process. These milestones are specifically suggested in the Biblical record, i.e. infant, teen, adult and parent. These stages of development toward full maturity are briefly described below.

The Infant Stage of Maturity

In addition to the above mentioned references contrasting infancy with full-grown maturity, the Apostle Peter writes a description of the infant Christian. He says, “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Peter 2:2).

The passage paints a picture of a spiritual infant as having established a relationship with the Lord, having sensed His presence and received eternal life and its goodness. These “newborn babies” have not however, developed the ability to digest the meatier truths of the Kingdom.

The infant level of maturity corresponds with the above described terms *being/connect*. The infant Christian has established his life and identity in Christ.

Second Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” The infant is called to establish earthly relationships with his fellow sojourners. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:19, “...you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.”

Subjective observation of infant Christians suggests that spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity requires safe environments for them to ask the questions that often accompany the dramatic life-change associated with establishing a personal relationship with Christ. These questions must be answered truthfully, but in a way that is digestible to the fledgling Christian. The pilot process explored in this research includes a small group designed to create a trust environment for that purpose.

The Adolescent Stage of Maturity

The Apostle John describes three levels of maturity in his first epistle to the church. He writes in 1 John 2:13, “I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father.” In John’s description, children are presented as having established a relationship with the Heavenly Father. Adult believers are described as having a fatherly role in the church.

John acknowledges the levels of maturity described above. He adds an interim level of maturity to the discussion. He paints a picture of these believers as having moved past the elementary teachings about Christ. They have laid a basic

biblical foundation for their faith and they are strong in it. They have faced many of the spiritual battles that young Christians face and have been found victorious.

For the purposes of this study the human development phase known as adolescence is considered to correspond with the *becoming/growing* dynamic. The adolescent Christian is called to "...be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:17-18). These followers of Christ have moved beyond the infant stage of being unable to digest the meatier truths of faith. They are still vulnerable to the spiritual attacks designed to undermine their faith. Subjective experience with adolescent Christians suggests that this stage is highly exploratory in terms of questioning personal beliefs and challenging the cultural norms from which they have been redeemed. A small-group environment and assessment process are critical to assisting these adolescent Christians at this stage.

The Adult Stage of Maturity

Many of the passages mentioned above describe a challenge for believers to continue growing toward maturity. In Ephesians 4:22-25 Paul challenges Christians with the words, "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." An adult believer might be described as one who has taken that challenge seriously.

The adult Christian is one who has settled many of the issues wrestled with during the infant and adolescent stages of spiritual formation. He has put off the old thought patterns. He has put away childish things. He has exchanged his desire to conform to the values of the fallen world to a longing to demonstrate the values of Kingdom. He has a clearer sense of God's purpose for life, a greater commitment to the lordship of Christ and a growing desire to help others to reach maturity.

The Apostle Paul describes the dynamics of these first three dimensions of maturity in Romans 12:1-8. The infant Christian is called to take the Romans 12:1 step of presenting his life to Christ as an act of worship. Paul writes, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship." The adolescent Christian is challenged to take the Romans 12:2 step of re-patterning his thinking according to the Truth of God's Word. Paul instructs, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." The adult Christian is taught to intentionally consider his place in the body of Christ. Paul admonishes believers with the words, "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you" (Romans 12:3).

The adult Christian can then be described as one who has come through that journey and is committed to the Romans 12:4-8 dynamic of discovering his place of service in the Body according to his gifts and thereby becoming a productive part of

the Christian community. Paul writes, “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully” (Romans 12:4-8).

The Ephesians 4 call is to grow toward maturity until we reach unity in the full measure of Christ. Therefore, it must be noted, the journey never ends on this temporal plain. However, the adult Christian can be said to have reached a level of maturity where he is committed to be a producer in the kingdom of God and not just a consumer. Hence, this level of maturity corresponds with the *doing/serve* terminology described above.

The Parent Stage of Maturity

A fourth dynamic might be described as a level of responsibility for the adult believer who is continuing to grow toward fruitful maturity, i.e. the Christian parent. The Christian parent can be described as an adult believer who recognizes that maturity is not an end in itself. This follower of Christ recognizes that a significant element of Christian maturity includes helping the young believers around him in their spiritual formation process.

A Pauline understanding of spiritual formation is not complete without this fourth dynamic. In Paul's letter to Titus, he instructs Titus to continue teaching the old men and women suggesting that reaching full maturity is a life-long, never-ending process. He also says these older Christians should teach the young Christians. This suggests that the journey toward full maturity has not been completed until a believer has reproduced himself by providing mentoring and guidance for a younger believer.

In the spiritual formation pilot program utilized by WBCC and explored in this research, the parent role is described as an adult Christian who has accepted the responsibility of providing assistance to those around him who are *being/connecting*, *becoming/growing* and *doing/serving* in the Kingdom of God. They are the leaders of the small group environments designed for spiritual formation.

Church Leaders Have Responsibility at Every Level of Maturity

The rubric described above suggests two things. First, every believer is called to grow toward maturity "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13-14). The call is to "all" believers. The call is to grow until the whole measure of Christ is reached. Secondly, church leaders are called to "prepare the saints" until they reach this level of Christ-like maturity. The suggestion being that part of the maturity process includes giving away whatever life-lessons are learned along the way.

Given that understanding, it becomes imperative that leaders understand and embrace their responsibilities to Christ and His Body. The following is a brief description of those responsibilities at each level of maturity.

Responsibility at the *Being/Connecting/Infant* level

Developing a Biblical theology of spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity requires that one begin with the call of God. Jesus of Nazareth clearly defined the mandate in His statement recorded in Matthew 28:19. He says, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Soon after uttering this command, and just before ascending to the Father, Jesus challenged the members of the early church to prepare themselves to receive the Holy Spirit. He told them He would come again, but in the interim, the Holy Spirit would empower them to fulfill the mandate. Luke records Jesus’ prophetic words in Acts 1:8-9. He writes, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.”

The call to be witnesses included the promise of supernatural resources to fulfill the mandate. The initial task for the fledgling church was to wait for those resources, in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Some might argue that mandate was fulfilled in the first century. However, the Apostle Peter, writing near the end of the first century encouraged the church to

stay on task. He said, “The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). It is reasonable to surmise that, since Jesus has not yet returned, the mandate remains.

The problem, as introduced in Chapter One, is that the American Church is failing abysmally at that mandate. Barna, Rainer, Anderson, et al. chart church attendance in America at historic lows. They report a nearly consistent decline since the 1960’s with the exception of a brief upsurge immediately following the tragic events of September 11, 2001.⁷ While church attendance is only one measure of spiritual commitment or maturity, the lack of exposure to and education in Scripture has produced a largely biblically illiterate and morally bankrupt population, including a majority who now believe that “salvation can be earned.”⁸

The problem is compounded by a church that has largely turned inward. Peters writes, “A church will grow to the degree that it is able to transform centripetalism into centrifugalism. A church will grow to the degree, then, that its membership becomes mobile in witnessing (Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19-21).”⁹ The result of a centripetal or inward focus is total failure in the Heavenly mandate. Fulfillment of the mandate requires a centrifugal or outward focus.

Peters’ perspective is church growth. This research primarily focuses on spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity. The goal of the pilot process being

⁷ George Barna, *The State of the Church, 2002* (Ventura, CA: Issachar Resources, a division of the Barna Research Group, 2002), 15.

⁸ Ibid., 77.

⁹ George W. Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, Co. 1981), 210.

explored in this research is not the numerical growth of the local church, it is the spiritual growth of its constituent population. However, when the full spectrum of spiritual formation beginning with conversion to faith in Jesus Christ is embraced, the church will grow numerically. Numerical growth is not the goal, it is the natural by-product of reaching people for Christ.

The problem is that most evangelical Christians, within a few years of committing to become Christ-followers, do not know any unsaved people much less have any positive influence in their lives. All of their focus is given to Christian activities, Christian entertainment, doing business with Christian organizations and sending their children to Christian schools. Many search for jobs in Christian organizations which completes the inward, or centripetalist, circle.

When confronted with this reality many Christians, in the Pentecostal/Evangelical context, cite a theological conflict. The Wesleyan and Classical Pentecostal revivals have always placed much emphasis on holiness as a lifestyle. The mandate “*to go into the world*” (Matthew 28:19) juxtaposed with the call to “*come out from among them and be separate*” (1 Corinthians 6:17) has long seemed paradoxical to many in this world.

The Bible does present the mandate, but it also says the Christian’s citizenship is not of this world. Paul writes to the believers at Philippi, “For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:18-20).

Jesus does teach that the believer's worldview is to be different from that of the unbelieving world. He says, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:18-19). Paul is clear about the believer's lifestyle being different, "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law" (Galatians 5:16-18). He equals presents that the believers relationships are to be different, "What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. Therefore come out from them and be separate,' says the Lord. 'Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters,' says the Lord Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:16-18).

The result of this apparent paradox is a variety of views as to how the church is to relate to world around it which are discussed in more detail below. Most of these views have done more to serve as obstacles to the fulfillment of the mission, than aid to it. Yet the mandate remains.

The Bible is God's inspired word to us. There is no contradiction between the various truths it presents. It is necessary however, to interpret Scripture in light of all Scripture. The same Holy Spirit that inspired the Apostle Paul to write "...come out

from among them and be separate...” also inspired him to call us to get the gospel to them. Paul wrote to the church at Rome, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news’” (Romans 10:13-15).

Paul’s personal commitment to the mandate is well documented. It is summarized in his words quoted by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, saying, “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24).

Paul modeled sharing the gospel in the most personal terms possible. He wrote to the church at Corinth, “When I am with those who are oppressed, I share their oppression so that I might bring them to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone so that I might bring them to Christ” (1 Corinthians 9:22 NLT). A reasonable interpretation of Paul’s words leads to the belief that he intentionally spent enough time with unbelievers to discover some area of common ground with them. Then once he found it, he used that common ground to build a rapport with them. His purpose in doing so was to share his knowledge of, and faith in Christ, with them. His goal was that they would come to know Christ personally. It could be said that the Apostle Paul was one of the first Christians to model effectively the

system thinking approach to the mission as referenced in Chapter One of this document.

How does one resolve the apparent contradiction between “be separate” (Romans 10:13-15) and “be close enough to find common ground” (1 Corinthians 9:22)? It is Jesus Himself who clears up the conflict. In the closing hours of his time on Earth, Jesus prayed one of the most intense prayers ever recorded. A significant part of His prayer addressed this issue. He prayed, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (John 17:15-18).

Jesus clearly expected His followers to infiltrate the world system and to impact it for good. He knew the dangers that would befall them in doing so. Jesus clearly taught centrifugalism.

The Jewish teachers and leaders were likely stunned when, in Luke 15, Jesus illustrated the heart of the Heavenly Father as a shepherd who goes to look for the lost lamb, or the bride who sweeps the house for the lost coin, or the loving father scanning the horizon ready to throw a party for the wayward son upon his return. Never before had the Jews been presented with such a compassionate picture of the heart of God. Peters writes,

Principally this transformation is from Old Testament procedure to New Testament procedure. In the Old Testament the people of the world were both privileged and obligated to come to Jerusalem in order to hear and learn the law of God. Indeed, the Old Testament envisions a time when nations will come to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. There is no specific missionary command in the Old Testament such as that which the church received from its risen Lord and which is encoded in the Great Commission. The New Testament church is

commissioned to “go into all the world” to “preach the gospel to every creature” to make the gospel message available “among the nations.” The New Testament does not invite the people to the church but commissions the church to go to the people.¹⁰

Jesus’ teaching of this principle did not stop at storytelling. He role modeled the philosophy. In Luke’s account of Jesus’ life he tells the story of Matthew’s conversion and subsequent outreach to his unbelieving friends (Luke 5:27-29). Some time after his conversion, Matthew held a dinner party. He invited both Jesus and a collection of his unbelieving friends. Jesus readily accepted the invitation. While there Jesus interacted with them on such a personal level that the religious leaders of the day were angered. When asked why He would dare sit down to dinner with sinners He answered, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32). Jesus’ purpose for having dinner with them was deeper than that of meeting His own need of personal nourishment or desire for human fellowship. It was to make intentional, personal contact with unbelievers that would potentially lead them to a personal faith in Him. It was this role modeling that precipitated the above mentioned teachings.

Having taught the principle by means of word and deed, Jesus sent His early disciples out in the same fashion. Luke records His instructions as He sent the seventy out. “When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you” (Luke 10:8). “In saying this, Jesus was giving more than dietary advice, He was commanding them to be sensitive to local culture. He was telling them to fit in with

¹⁰ Ibid., 211.

those they wanted to reach.”¹¹ Jesus was telling them to learn from their audience before attempting to convey a message to them. That does not change the content of the message; however, it profoundly affects the approach used in presenting it.

There is little doubt Jesus fully expected that philosophy to continue being the primary mind-set for His church after His ascension. In his final prayer, only hours before facing the illegal trials that preceded his murder, Jesus prayed for their protection as they went, “I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15 NASB).

The Apostle Paul understood Jesus’ instructions and personal model. Therefore, he saw no conflict in his call to be separate, while being close. His life was dedicated to being a living example of the Christ-like life, i.e. “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). He was equally dedicated to building relationships beyond the confines of his circle of Christian relationships.

The solution, therefore is to live a life that is modeled after that of Christ Himself, i.e. a sanctified life of integrity, honesty and holiness. It is to live that life, as much as possible, in close proximity to those who don’t yet know Christ. He taught, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14-15). Barna suggests, “We take the first step toward truly preparing to reach the

¹¹ Richard Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 195.

unchurched when we become models of faithfulness, obedience, holiness, and righteousness.”¹² In a world filled with mistrust, fear, and hopelessness that type of lifestyle stands out in the crowd. It also opens doors to share the truth of the Gospel with those who get close enough to see it.

While this theological perspective is theoretically accepted among fellow Pentecostal/Evangelical colleagues, their orthopraxy suggests otherwise. The mandate will not be fulfilled until the conflict between this espoused theory and the actual theory-in-use is addressed and resolved. Packer writes,

Evangelism and theology for the most part go their separate way, and the result is great loss for both. When theology is not held on course by the demands of evangelistic communication, it grows abstract and speculative, wayward in method, theoretical in interest and irresponsible in stance. When evangelism is not fertilized, fed and controlled by theology, it becomes a stylized performance seeking its effect through manipulative skills rather than the power of vision and Truth. Both theology and evangelism are then in one important sense *unreal*, false to their own God-given nature; for all true theology has an evangelistic thrust, and all true evangelism is theology in action.¹³

No theology of spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity can be complete without an evaluation of both the mind set of the Christ followers mandated to reach the world for Christ and of the unsaved world desperately in need of the Savior. The orthopraxy that grows out of that understanding must include a methodology for growing in personal faith while living that faith out in the midst of a world desperately in need of the Savior. That will not happen until the disparate views of

¹² George Barna, *Grow Your Church From the Outside In: Understanding the Unchurched and How to Reach Them* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2002), 17.

¹³ J. I. Packer, *Theological Perspectives on Church Growth*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co, 1976), 91.

how Christians are to relate to the world are addressed in the light of Jesus' call to go and make disciples.

The mind set of Christ followers has long been the first hurdle to effective evangelism. Wagner writes, "In our day and throughout history, Christians have come to differing conclusions about how the church should relate to the world. Of the many ways this has been worked out, four, I think, are significant enough to let us see the spectrum of options."¹⁴ Wagner goes on elucidate similar categories to those presented in Niebuhr's classic work on the topic.¹⁵ One group of Christians defined in these works believe it to be their responsibility to control the world. "This was the view of the medieval papacy, its beginnings traceable to the emperor Constantine and therefore called by some 'Constantinism.'"¹⁶ A second group of Christ-followers believe themselves to be the servants of the world. These Christians focus their resources on social needs as determined by socio-political systems around them. A third group would be the centripedalists referred to above. "Those who hold and practice this view tend to form themselves into Christian counter-cultures. This has been the traditional position, for example of some Anabaptists and Mennonite groups."¹⁷ Early extreme manifestations of this view include the monastic communities dating back to the earliest days of Christianity. The fourth group holds the centrifugalist view. In their view,

¹⁴ C. Peter Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1981), 34.

¹⁵ Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

¹⁶ Wagner, 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

The church does not attempt to control the world, since it has no biblical mandate to do so. Quite the contrary, the world is said to be controlled by principalities and powers. There is spiritual wickedness in high places. Satan is the god of this present age and will remain so until the second coming of Christ inaugurates the fullness of the age to come. Because of this, the church goes forth with the agenda of the kingdom of God and announces this agenda to the world. It can not ignore the world's agenda because that agenda informs the church of the needs and hurts of the world that Jesus so deeply wants to address and heal.¹⁸

In recent years this outreach mind set has come to be known to many as contagious Christianity. Mark Mittleberg says, “God wants us to become contagious Christians—His agents, who will first catch His love and then urgently and infectiously offer it to all who are willing to consider it. This is His primary plan, the one Jesus modeled so powerfully, to spread God’s grace and truth person to person until there’s an epidemic of changed lives around the world.”¹⁹

A theology of spiritual formation to fruitful maturity that begins with reaching unsaved people requires that believers live in such a way that unsaved people are drawn to their faith as they get close to their person. Paul writes, “Show that [you] can be fully trusted, so that in every way [you] will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.” (Titus 2:10). It also requires that they not allow themselves to be shocked by the lifestyles of those unsaved who often live so far from the truth. It requires the Christ-modeled approach to those who need the Lord. That is exactly what the Apostle Paul was calling Christians to when he wrote, “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Bill Hybels and Mark Mittleberg, *Contagious Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 23.

fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:1-5).

It takes unselfish people to reach an unchurched community for Christ. It requires church members who are willing to organize their lives and their churches so as to reach unchurched people where they are. It requires a genuine desire to provide a culture of trustworthiness, acceptance and willingness to present the Gospel on the bottom shelf so everyone can reach it while personally maintaining the eternal truths of God’s Word.

It is believed this is only possible when churches understand and embrace both critically important, yet distinctly differing, roles of the church. Peters rightly asserts,

The church is divinely designated to be the spiritual home of the believers. In it they find spiritual nurture, instruction, fellowship, and discipline—all that they need to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. The believer must be brought to spiritual, doctrinal, ethical and social maturity. This is scriptural (Acts 2:42; Ephesians 4:11-16) and this is essential (1 Peter 2:1-9; 2 Peter 1:3-9). But this is not an end in itself. Believers are called to bear fruit, to be witnesses, to proclaim the Excellencies of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light. To fulfill this wonderful purpose the believers must move out of the warm nest of the church into the cold world. It is pleasant to abide in the community of the saints, but it is profitable to be in the world and to share Christ with the world.²⁰

²⁰ Peters, 213.

To do that, church leaders and members must understand and embrace the whole mission of the church. It is not just *becoming/growing* and *doing/serving*, it is equally *being/connecting* with God and His family. Without that complete mind set the church is poised to die in any given generation. Embracing this holistic approach to the mission will require developing a variety of environments specifically designed to address all of these dynamics.

Many believe the church will not develop a genuine theology of centrifugalism nor accompanying systemic processes to accomplish the mandate until they embrace the current realities identified in Chapter One of this document and further expressed in Chapter Two.

Packer writes, “In the Bible evangelism is not only a work of God, it is also a work of man or rather a work of God through man. As God sent his Son to become man and so to ‘explain’ him (John 1:18), so now, adhering to the incarnational principle, if we may so speak, he sends Christian men to be heralds, ambassadors and teachers in His name on His behalf.”²¹

The need for this perspective is statistically demonstrated in the geographic and demographic context of this research project. The population data presented below (Table 2) reveals that there are more than 230,000 people living within a 20 minute drive of WBCC’s location at the time of this writing. It further demonstrates that more are moving into the target area every year.

²¹ Packer, 95.

Table 2. Population Trends in the Vicinity of WBCC

	Population within 20 mile radius²²	WBCC active attenders²³	Population Growth by %	WBCC growth by %
1990	195,570	352		
1995	206,570	1,224	5.32%	71.2%
2000	216,630	1,604	4.64%	23.6%
2005	228,930	2,064	5.37%	22.2%
2010 Projected	240,448	2,476	5.007%	20%

Further research suggests that at least 80,000 of these people are unsaved and unchurched.²⁴ The church must mobilize every available resource to reach them. Any spiritual formation process adopted by the church must encompass the full continuum of conversion all the way to fruitful maturity.

Responsibility at the *Becoming/Growing/Adolescent* Level

As important as the mission to reach people for Christ is, the Great Commission is not just a mandate to make believers. Matthew, Paul, John, the Hebrew writer et al. declare the call to be that of making fruitfully mature followers of Christ. The stages of development in the maturity process are helpful in providing general milestones along the way on a believer's respective journey toward fruitful maturity in Christ. However, there must be an accompanying description of the character traits toward which a growing Christian is striving.

²² "Demographics on Demand," *Easy Analytic Software, Inc.*
http://www.easidemographics.com/Cgi-bin/Dod_Trend.asp (accessed 2005).

²³ Statistics were derived from annual WBCC reports.

²⁴ Based on 1989 telephone survey of 20,000 area homes in which 35% of the target population identified themselves as unchurched. A survey done within the confines of Western Branch Community Church members revealed that the same percentage of church members were previously unsaved as were unchurched.

Defining what a fruitfully mature follower of Christ looks like, from our human perspective, is a daunting task. Any number of criteria could be selected to describe such a person. Selecting a definitive passage to establish such a criteria is not so difficult. Continuing in the embrace of St. Matthew's commitment to spiritual formation, the Sermon on the Mount was chosen to explore a possible source of that description.

Schnackenburg comments that Jesus' sermon "is a matter of actions that proceed from a sincere heart... and conduct oriented to God's trustworthiness, goodness and fidelity... and will be a mark of Jesus' disciples if they are to share in the coming reign of God."²⁵ Keener suggests that the setting on the mountain suggested that one greater than Moses had begun his mission, and contended that this new law of Jesus' radical demands "confronts us with all the unnerving ferocity with which they would have struck their first hearers."²⁶ Numerous other scholars also point to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Shepherd writes,

The Sermon on the Mount was a kind of inaugural address on the theme: *The Ideals of the Kingdom of Heaven*. It was a real connected discourse at a definite time and place. It had a special application to the twelve just chosen, serving as a kind of ordination sermon. But it was also applicable to the great number of believers present and the multitude of others who had not yet definitely accepted his teaching. Christ's idea of Righteousness as here set forth, became the kingdom's ideal of Righteousness which has never yet been approximately realized by humanity. In His universal eternal principles in this sermon, Jesus laid the basis for the kingdom work for all time. In one discourse, He superseded all previous standards and set up the new and final religious goal for the human race. He here uttered the final word

²⁵ Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, trans. Robert Burr (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 49.

²⁶ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 161.

about character and privilege, conduct and duty, religious ideals, the divine and human relations of men, and the supreme objective and goal in life and how to attain it.²⁷

Stott agrees, “The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed. It is the nearest thing to a manifesto that he ever uttered, for it is his own description of what he wanted his followers to be and to do.”²⁸

There is some admitted personal trepidation in selecting the Sermon on the Mount for this purpose. As powerful as Jesus’ words are, it is daunting to consider its directives as the personal measure of Christian maturity. It would be very easy for the most dedicated Christ followers to read Jesus’ profound words, recognize his own personal failings and run away in shame. Bonhoeffer writes, “Having reached the end of the beatitudes, we naturally ask if there is any place on this earth for the community which they describe. Clearly, there is one place, and only one, and that is where the Poorest, meekest, and most sorely tried of all men is to be found—on the cross at Golgotha.”²⁹

The selection of the Sermon on the Mount, as the criterion for the measure of Christian maturity, does not lie in a misguided confidence that the ideals can be reached. Realistically, these ideals can not be reached in a lifetime of commitment. It lies in the grace-based manner in which Jesus’ presents them.

²⁷ J.W. Shepherd, *The Christ of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1939), 176.

²⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount: Christian Counter Culture* (Downer’s Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 15.

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), 97.

Thielicke's classic work on the sermon elucidates Jesus' grace-soaked presentation. He begins by painting a vivid picture of the setting in which this sermon of sermons is presented. He describes the literally thousands of hurting people, from every walk of life and background, who gathered before Him. He conjectures what drew them there,

Undoubtedly, the reason for this is that men sense in this Figure something they do not see in any other man. For one thing they see (and we all see) that he stands among us as if he were one of us; he stands the test of misery. At the same time, they see in him something else, which is far more incomprehensible and, put along side their first observation, almost inconceivable: the fact that the powers of guilt and suffering cannot touch him; that mysteriously, the powers retreat as he comes by.³⁰

Then, Thielicke describes in rapt accuracy what happened that day,

When Jesus begins to speak, he doesn't do what every other preacher of the day (and ours for that matter) does. He doesn't begin to shout judgment and warnings, instead He says, "You are blessed." Jesus understood that no man has ever yet been healed by judgment and punishment. Always the merely negative only makes us sick. What good does it do if in the midst of the judgment and retribution that comes to us we must say, "it serves you right," "you can't kick it"; "you made your bed and now you must lie in it." I ask: "What good does it do to have this insight into judgment?" Obviously, none at all. It only pitches us into deeper hopelessness and inner paralysis, and in not a few people stirs up the horrible and sinful desire to end it all by violence.³¹

The crowd is stunned by Jesus' grasp on every issue in their lives. It was as though He knew them all personally, even intimately, and yet He speaks of those personal failures with such grace that they are drawn to sincerely attempt to live up to the ideals He presents.

³⁰ Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again: Sermons on the Sermon on the Mount*, trans. John W. Doberstein (London: James Clarke and Company LTD, 1963), 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

One is compelled to ensure that his presentation of these ideals, in whatever setting, does not become a club with which he browbeats his listeners or readers. He is moved to resist the temptation, to which so many preachers have succumbed, i.e. to sacrifice an accurate interpretation of Jesus' grace-filled words, in the name of convincing people to live up the standards. It is profoundly human to do so.

Willard writes, "This struggle with mistranslation reflects our intense need to find in the condition referred to something good, something God supposedly desires or even requires, that then can serve as a 'reasonable' basis for the blessedness he bestows. But that precisely misses the point that the very formulation of the Beatitudes should bring to our attention."³² Willard continues, "In so doing we merely substitute another banal legalism for the ecstatic pronouncement of the gospel. Those poor in spirit are called 'blessed' by Jesus, not because they are in a meritorious condition, but because, precisely in spite of and in the midst of their ever so deplorable condition, the rule of heaven has moved redemptively upon and through them by the grace of Christ."³³

Willard concludes, "Those spiritually impoverished ones present before Jesus in the crowd are blessed only because the gracious touch of the heavens has freely fallen upon them. But the mistranslations remain attractive because they suit our human sense of propriety, which cries out against God's blessing on people just

³² Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), 102.

³³ Ibid.

because of their need and just because he chooses—or perhaps just because someone asked him to.”³⁴

This understanding of Jesus’ grace-filled presentation does not translate to an antinomian understanding of Christianity. To the contrary, the teacher is compelled to assess diligently, not only his public presentations, but his private life, relationships, beliefs and behaviors in light of Jesus’ ideals. He reads “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the Sons of God” (Matthew 5:9) and finds himself crying softly, “Oh, how I want God to look into my life and say, ‘That’s my boy!’”

Bonhoeffer states it powerfully as he writes,

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without Church discipline, Communion without confession and absolution without contrition. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is *costly* because it cost a man his life. It is *grace* because it gives a man the only true life.³⁵

Any use of the Sermon on the Mount as a means of measuring Christian maturity would have to be heavily salted with grace, but it can not be shied away from either. It must be at the heart of any Christ follower’s assessment of where he is his journey toward maturity in Christ. After all, for the fully-devoted follower, Christ is the quintessential image of his heart’s desire.

³⁴ Ibid., 103.

³⁵ Bonhoeffer, 39.

Christian Characteristics in which to Grow

Given the acknowledged tension between grace and Christian ideals, the following is a brief description of thirteen categories contained in Matthew, chapters 5-7. It is not an attempt at a thorough exegesis of the passage. It is an attempt to capture the essence of Jesus' teachings in describable categories which can be used as a means of assessing one's progress in a life of being fully devoted to becoming a fully mature follower of Christ.

Humility

Jesus says in Matthew 5:3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The Jewish audience, to which he was speaking at the time, had a skewed understanding of what it meant to be poor. For them poverty was about temporal things not spiritual ones. This, even though their own King Solomon had concluded long before that accumulating things (Ecclesiastes 2:7, 8), experiencing pleasure (Ecclesiastes 2:3, 10), and achieving success (Ecclesiastes 2:4-6, 9) were dead ends in life (Ecclesiastes 12:8). Jesus use of the phrase "poor in spirit" likely created a paradox for his listeners.

To Jesus being blessed had nothing to do with possessions or position. He was talking about humility. Shepherd writes, "The Jews thought and taught that outward material prosperity was a sign of God's favor and blessing. Jesus declares here that man cannot pertain to the kingdom of God, apart from humility of spirit which recognizes one's own spiritual poverty."³⁶

³⁶ Shepherd, 178.

Jesus demonstrated the ultimate expression of this ideal. The Apostle Paul calls us to emulate that expression saying, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:5-8 NKJV).

Paul goes on to describe the end result of that expression, “Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, ¹¹and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11 NKJV).

For the fully-devoted follower of Christ, the way up is down.

Brokenness

Jesus says in Matthew 5:4, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Again, Jesus presents a paradoxical statement on the surface. How can the sad be the fortunate ones?

Fully devoted followers of Christ come to understand that an intimate relationship with Christ begins with a genuine mourning over personal sin. They are aware that it was their own personal spiritual failure for which Jesus died. That kind of brokenness leads to a genuine sense of God’s grace and comfort at work in the

believer's life. Psalms 34:18 says, "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

Maturing believers come to understand that growth in Christ often includes ongoing brokenness. "The disciple-community does not shake off sorrow as though it were no concern of its own, but willingly bears it."³⁷ The Prophet Jeremiah describes the Nation of Israel as becoming like a clay pot, placed on the potter's wheel again, broken down, to be reformed, this time with fewer flaws and therefore more fit for service.

Christian leaders come to understand that effectiveness in the Kingdom requires brokenness toward the destruction around them as well. Nehemiah, having learned of the destruction in Jerusalem, was broken with grief. He fasted and prayed until the Lord gave him favor to do something about the need. It was out of that brokenness that the earthly king, whom he served, saw the need and made provision for Nehemiah to be sent and supplied.

The goal of the fully-devoted follower is to reach that level in which "Sorrow cannot tire them or wear them down, it cannot embitter them or cause them to break down under the strain; far from it, for they bear their sorrow in the strength of Him who bears them up, who bore the whole suffering of the world upon a cross."³⁸

³⁷ Bonhoeffer, 92.

³⁸ Ibid., 93.

Holy Spirit Empowerment

Jesus says in Matthew 5:5, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Meekness is not to be confused with weakness. The Greek word translated meekness is *praus* (πραΰς).³⁹ It carries with it the concept of humility, gentleness and strength under control. Like all the other categories in this list it is not humanly attainable. It is only possible through the power of the Holy Spirit operating in the life of a fully-devoted follower of Christ.

As Jesus instructed His disciples about His departure he comforted them with the news that the Holy Spirit would come. He would serve as their comforter. “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever-the Spirit of Truth” (John 14:16-17a). He would serve as their teacher. “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26). Just before His ascension, Jesus told his followers to wait for the Holy Spirit to come, telling them succinctly “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). They followed Jesus’ instructions. They fasted and prayed in unity for ten days until the Holy Spirit came. The church was born that day in a profound way and began to spread rapidly through the known world.

Throughout the Acts of the Apostles the church demonstrated understanding, spiritual power, boldness with humility and effectiveness, all attributed to their deep

³⁹ James Strong, *Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries*, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), G4239.

dedication to following Christ and the corresponding work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

A Desire to Grow

Jesus says in Matthew 5:6, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” The Apostle Peter later writes, “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:18). Peter’s words were a command to all followers of Christ. Jesus’ words were a simple statement of truth. Those who are truly blessed, are those are never fully satisfied with their current level of relationship with Christ, knowledge about Christ or power with Christ.

No systems or methods devised can cause growth to happen. They only serve to provide the means by which it can be facilitated. Growth requires a genuine, heart-felt desire to grow. It is this desire that compels Christ followers to intentionally assess their current maturity levels and set specific goals toward full maturity.

A Serving Heart

Jesus says in Matthew 5:7, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” The Greek word translated mercy is *eleemon* (ἐλεειν) which carries the idea of being compassionate toward others, of having a caring and serving heart.⁴⁰

Bonhoeffer describes the highest expression of the merciful. He writes, “They have an irresistible love for the downtrodden, the sick, the wretched, the wronged, the outcast and all who are tortured with anxiety. They go out and seek all who are

⁴⁰ Strong, G1655

enmeshed in the toils of sin and guilt. No distress is too great, not sin too appalling for their pity. If any man falls into disgrace, the merciful will sacrifice their own honor to shield him, and take his shame upon themselves.”⁴¹

Fully devoted followers of Christ have more than a general sense of compassion toward others. They develop an intentionality about how they will translate that compassion into action. Jesus again role modeled this attitude. At age twelve, He told His mother He had to be in His father’s house, tending to His father’s business.⁴² At the time of Jesus’ death John recorded, “Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (John 19:30). Those two defining events stand out like bookends on His life, from a very early age declaring that he had to do the work the Father sent him to do and at the end of his earthly life declaring the mission to be completed.

Jesus was motivated to do the Father’s will. He explicitly said to His Earthly parents, “Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business” (Luke 2:49 NKJV)? He was equally motivated by His compassion for, and desire to serve people even though those same people killed the prophets previously sent to warn them. Matthew recorded his broken-hearted sentiment, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing” (Matthew 23:37).

Paul invests a great deal of his writings on this topic. In describing the church, he uses analogies such as a body (1 Corinthians 12), a building (Ephesians 2),

⁴¹ Bonhoeffer, 95.

and a family (Galatians 6). In each case he makes the point that Christ followers belong to each other and that all are needed to complete the whole. The Christian life is always to be lived out in the context of community, a community in which we love one another, encourage one another, honor one another and in so many ways, serve one another. Luke describes that early community with the words, “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need” (Acts 2:44-45).

Pure Motives

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8) is an example of Jesus speaking to our motives, i.e. why we do what we do. Being a fully-devoted follower of Christ is not merely about doing right things. It is about having right motives for why we do the things we do.

King David was said to be a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22), having served God’s purpose in his lifetime (Acts 13:36). David’s multiple failures to honor God throughout his life might bring pause to understanding those passages. It is reasonably suggested that David’s redeeming quality was not that of a perfect life before the Lord, but his willingness to confess his failures when confronted with them. One can almost feel his anguish as he prays, “Create in me a pure heart, O God” (Psalm 51:10), having suffered deeply from the shame of his moral failure. He even took the initiative to seek out any hidden flaws in his life praying, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24).

Nearing the end of His time on Earth, Jesus prays for his disciples, and all who would come behind them, “Sanctify them by the truth, your word is truth” (John 17:17). In this prayer, he expresses His desire that His followers live in intimate relationship with Him and with pure motives for serving him. The writer of the Hebrews goes so far as to write, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

Healthy Relationships

Everything rises and falls on relationships. First is a personal relationship with Christ; second is our relationships with fellow human travelers. The greatest joys of life as well as the deepest pains are typically traceable to our relationships. As important as they are, conflict seems to be an inevitable part of them. As such Jesus invests a significant portion of His central sermon to the topic. He launches the topic with “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9).

His discourse continues with references to one’s attitude and behavior (Matthew 5:21) toward others. He instructs His followers to take the initiative toward being reconciled in the eventuality of human relational breakdown. He directs His followers in the proper attitudes and actions toward those with whom they have financial disputes (Matthew 5:25). He addresses appropriate marital boundaries for both married couples and the singles with whom they relate (Matthew 5:26-27). He concludes these directives with summary statements about how to relate to both friends and foes (Matthew 5:43).

For the fully-devoted follower of Jesus, peacemaking is far more than conflict avoidance. “It is clear beyond question...that we could never ourselves seek conflict or be responsible for it. On the contrary, we are called to peace, we are actively to ‘pursue’ peace, we are to ‘strive for peace with all men’ and so far as it depends on us, we are to ‘live peaceably with all’”⁴³

Sharing Faith

Jesus paints a vivid picture of His followers’ responsibility in this category when he says, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).

Stott writes, “As disciples of Jesus, we are not to conceal the truth we know or the truth of what we are. We are not to pretend to be other than we are, but willing for our Christianity to be visible to all.”⁴⁴

Jesus pronounces blessings for those who face difficulty and rejection in following His directive by saying, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me” (Matthew 5:10-11). Jesus understands, “The world will be offended at them, and so

⁴³ Stott, 50.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 62.

the disciples will be persecuted for righteousness' sake. Not recognition, but rejection, is the reward they get from the world for their words and works. It is important that Jesus gives His blessing not merely to suffering in any just cause.”⁴⁵ In so doing, He emphasizes the importance of developing an intentionality about sharing our faith, not just regardless of the cost, but precisely because of the cost and associated benefit; i.e. blessing.

Prayer

A great deal of emphasis is placed on prayer during the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus instructed His followers, “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:5-8).

He is making a specific point about prayer. He says, “If the praying of Pharisees was hypocritical and that of pagans mechanical, then the praying of Christians must be real—sincere as opposed to hypocritical, thoughtful as opposed to mechanical. Jesus intends our minds and hearts to be involved in what we are

⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer, 97.

saying.”⁴⁶ Jesus goes on to give specific instruction on how to pray in what is commonly termed the Lord’s Prayer.

Jesus personally role modeled the importance of prayer by spending significant amounts of time alone in prayer during His time on Earth. Even when the responsibilities of ministry were pressing or when the crowds clamored for His time, Jesus took time to pray. This model is expressed clearly in Paul’s words, “Pray without ceasing”(I Thessalonians 5:17).

A life without a significant commitment to prayer, therefore, lacks an essential ingredient in being a fully-devoted follower of Christ.

Giving

God is a giver. No more poignant passage illustrates this truth than John’s recorded words, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Jesus therefore speaks with great authority when He says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21).

One of the most prominent features of the early church, as described in Acts 2:41-47, was a genuine spirit of sharing personal resources with those in need. When Paul chose to commend the Macedonian Church he spoke of their giving saying, “For

⁴⁶ Stott, 145.

I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints” (I Corinthians 8:3). He commanded the people of God saying, “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need” (Ephesians 4:28).

The Bible speaks of giving in terms of tithing (Malachi 3:10), free-will offerings (Leviticus 19:5), and of sacrificial giving (2 Corinthians 8:3-4). Every form of giving is best done in the spirit of hilarity. Paul writes, “Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). The word translated cheerful” in the NIV is the from the Greek word *hilaros* (ἡλάρος) from which the English word hilarity is derived.

The goal of every fully-devoted follower of Christ is to become a giver. His heart’s desire is to mature beyond the “what’s-in-it-for-me” understanding of what coming to Christ means. His commitment is to develop an attitude that says, “I am so blessed by grace, how can I not share a portion of my blessing, material and otherwise, with others?”

Faith

The Hebrew writer cuts to the bottom line on this issue quickly. “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). For

the fully devoted follower of Christ, faith is not a means to an end. Faith is not a magic formula for getting something. Faith is a total trust in and dependence on the Lord regardless of current circumstance. Fully devoted followers of Christ accept that doing life that way is the only way to please the Father.

Jesus demonstrated His faith, as well as the importance of our faith, on numerous occasions. One such occasion was at the burial site of His dear friend, Lazarus. After weeping over Mary's and Martha's lack of faith, Jesus instructed the men to roll away the stone covering the burial cave. "Then Jesus said, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me'" (John 11:40-42).

It is no surprise that Jesus includes bold words on this topic in the Sermon on the Mount saying,

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:25-34)

Nor it is a surprise when He includes instruction and encouragement saying,

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? ¹¹If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him. (Matthew 5:7-9)

Careful Speech

The original Jewish audience would have understood the principles Jesus refers to in Matthew 5:21-22 as he says, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

Wise King Solomon’s words, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (Proverbs 18:21 NKJV), may well have rung in their ears as Jesus applies the concept to human relationships. Later in His sermon of sermons Jesus instructs His followers to be very careful with that power. In Matthew 5:33-37 He is recorded saying,

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.” ³⁴But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷Simply let your “Yes” be “Yes,” and your “No,” “No”; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

In these passages Jesus walks through the litany of uses and abuses of the tongue. All of which when ignored produce great harm and when obeyed produce genuine blessing in the lives of all who hear.

In Solomon's description of the power of the tongue, cited above, he uses the metaphor, "those who love it will eat its fruit." Those words present a principle that says, "Words are very much like seeds," i.e. once planted they will produce a harvest. Paul warns in Galatians 6:7-9 "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

Fully-devoted followers of Christ are committed to weighing their words carefully so as to produce a harvest of blessing for all with whom they have contact.

A Biblical Worldview

A perusal of Jesus' earthly ministry demonstrates that He knew and understood the Scriptures thoroughly. Becoming like Christ, therefore, includes developing a life-defining knowledge and understanding of God's Word. No where does He make that more clearly than with His words,

"I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices

and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:18-19)”

The writer of the Hebrew letter actually chastises the church for not developing a deeper understanding of the truths about God. He writes, “Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity” (Hebrews 6:1).

The prophet Hosea prophesies that not knowing the truth leads to death. One can almost feel the anguish in his words, “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children.”(Hosea 4:6).

Even a cursory look at America’s suburban unchurched will likely lead to the conclusion that Jesus’ words, as well as Hosea’s prophecy, are being lived out today. Even consistent church attenders are often biblically illiterate. The results are a lack of assurance of salvation and confidence in their ability to make life decisions from a biblical worldview and all the problems associated with not doing so.

A biblical worldview is so much more than an accumulation of biblical facts and information. One’s worldview is defined as “The overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world.”⁴⁷ It therefore, informs our beliefs and behaviors in every area of life. It is faith that makes every difference in one’s life. Developing a worldview requires so much more than indoctrination in a set of values and ideals. Palmer writes,

When we speak of faith making an evident difference in how we think and express ourselves, we mean more than simply being able to state our beliefs clearly and succinctly. Indoctrination can achieve these results. But integration and indoctrination are not all the same.

⁴⁷ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s.v. “Worldview.”

Indoctrination seeks unquestioning acceptance of answers developed by someone else, usually an authority figure. Integration requires discovering answers for oneself, even if mentors, friends, or colleagues assist along the way. Indoctrination, even when well intentioned, inhibits the assumption of responsibility, because it restricts the questioning process which forms the basis of all sound decision-making. Integration, even when difficult and painful, promotes mature faith, because it involves assessing competing ideas and seeks to understand how the Christian faith speaks to such ideas.⁴⁸

Stott rightly concludes, “Thus the sermon ends on the same note of radical choice of which we have been aware throughout. Jesus does not set before his followers a string of easy ethical rules, so much as a set of values and ideals which is entirely distinctive from the way of the world. He summons us to renounce the prevailing secular culture in favor of the Christian counter-culture.”⁴⁹

Together these categories comprise a reasonable picture of the lofty ideals sought after by every fully-devoted follower of Christ. They lead those followers to imagine themselves at the feet of Jesus hearing His grace-soaked words as though they were being expressed for the first time. Their only reasonable response is, “Thank God, I am blessed! I am not worthy of such blessings, but I am eternally grateful for them.”

The next logical inquiry is, “How am I doing in these areas of my life with Christ?” No fully-devoted-to-becoming-fully-mature follower of Christ will consider himself to have arrived in any of the above mentioned character traits. Rather, each category will produce a desire to set appropriate goals toward full maturity in that area. Hull describes this journey as a process.

⁴⁸ Palmer, 14.

⁴⁹ Stott, 210.

He defines the church's responsibility in it, by saying,

Discipling is not an event; it is a process. No system can make a disciple, because discipleship requires that a person's will be activated by the Holy Spirit. The church has the responsibility to provide the clear vision and the vehicles that bring Christians into mature discipleship. Growth and accountability should be a part of every Christian's life, for his or her entire life; the need for these doesn't end until one gets transferred to heaven.⁵⁰

One weakness of attempting to develop a theological framework of this type is to attempt to delineate this process in terms of clearly-defined steps. The more accurate picture of growth toward Christian maturity is that of a life-long process by which one changes his understanding of himself and his surroundings, each change moving him toward the goal of Christ-likeness. James Fowler astutely writes,

It would be a mistake to think of the movement from one faith stage to another as analogous to climbing stairs or ascending a ladder, for two reasons: (1) It unnecessarily locks us into a kind of "higher"- "lower" mentality in thinking about stages, when the real issue has to do with a successive progression of more complex, differentiated and comprehensive modes of knowing and valuing. (2) The stair or ladder analogy, further might lead us to think of transition as a matter of the self clambering from one level or rung to another, essentially unchanged. Faith stage transitions represent significant alterations in the structures of one's knowing and valuing and therefore, in the basic orientation and responses of the self.⁵¹

While these understandings are acceptable, to effectively measure progress along the way there must be some standard by which sojourners can gauge themselves. There must be markers or milestones along the journey to gauge progress.

⁵⁰ Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Church* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell. A division of Baker Books, 1990), 33.

⁵¹ James Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 57-58.

The pilot process explored in this research project is one church's attempt to create such a process, not withstanding the foibles associated with it.

Responsibility at the *Doing/ Serving/Adult* Level

Christian maturity can never be viewed as an end in itself. Maturity has a purpose—to develop oneself to be able to fulfill God's purpose for life while on Earth. Christ presents the concept that our time on earth is intended to serve as personal preparation for eternity. His parable in Matthew 25 clearly delineates a responsibility for believers to recognize their talents and to utilize them in a way that produces a return for the Master who entrusted those gifts to them. The results are equally clear. The servant who fails in his assignment is chastised soundly by the master and his talent is passed to a servant who will use it in a way that produces a return. The faithful servant receives accolades from his master and hears the affirming words, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness" (Matthew 25:23).

This begs the question, How does one determine what talents he is responsible to use in such a way as to produce a return on the master's investment? The talent referenced in Jesus' parable were most likely financial assets owned by the master and entrusted to the servants for investment and return. In the New Testament context believers are entrusted with spiritual gifts. These gifts are, like talents, owned by the Master and entrusted to Christ-followers for investment and return. No biblical theology of spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity can be complete

without an understanding of spiritual gifts and their role in Christian service. At the core of the Pentecostal/Evangelical context is the belief that the empowering ministry of the Holy Spirit is a profoundly important part of forming that understanding.

The Holy Spirit's role, as the empowering agent for service, is evident throughout the biblical record beginning in the Old Testament. The examples of his agency during Old Testament times are too numerous to elucidate here.⁵² There is little dissention among conservative biblical theologians on this point.

There is also general acceptance in Pentecostal/Evangelical circles as it relates to the role of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament record. The Holy Spirit is presented as the primary agent of the Godhead who convicts of sin (John 16:7-8), seals believers for heaven (Ephesians 1:13-14), guides into Truth (John 15:26, 16:13), comforts (John 14:16-19), empowers worship (John 4:24), empowers the church to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8) and administers spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:7-11, Ephesians 4:11-12, 1 Peter 4:10).

That is where general acceptance of the role of Holy Spirit ends. Even within Pentecostal circles there is a great divergence of thought, especially as it relates to the administration and operation of spiritual gifts.

Horton, a leading pneumotologist in the Pentecostal world says,

There is no special order in which the Bible lists the gifts. Romans 12:6-8 begins with prophecy. First Corinthians 12:8-10 begins with the word of wisdom. The other three list begin with apostles. Some attempt to classify the gifts according to their nature, such as gifts of revelation, gifts of power, and gifts of utterance. Others distinguish

⁵² There are numerous specific references to the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of selected people in the Old Testament narrative. To name a few, Moses and his Elders, Numbers 11; Joshua, a man in whom is the spirit, Numbers 27; the judges such as Othniel, Judges 3 and Deborah, Judges 4-5. Not to mention the prophets who spoke as the oracles of God, by the Spirit.

between traveling gifts, such as apostles, teachers and evangelists; and local gifts such as pastors, government and helps. Or they divide them according to function, such as proclamation, teaching, service, and administration. These are all legitimate, but there is no way of avoiding the overlapping that comes in any system of classification.⁵³

A theology of the present work of the Holy Spirit can be derived from an understanding of three koine Greek words found the New Testament record and associated with the distribution of spiritual gifts. The words are *charisma* (χάρισμα), *phanerosis* (Φανερωσις) and *didomi* (δίδωμι).

The word *charisma* (χάρισμα) is translated in an assortment of ways, primarily having to do with a general sense of spiritual endowment. It is not an earned reward, it is a gift given by God's grace. It therefore can be applied to virtually any category of gifts given by God. All spiritual gifts are given to believers as an act of God's grace. An illustrative use of the word *charisma* is found in Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." The word "gift" in the English translation is the koine Greek word *charisma* in the ancient manuscripts. The concept is clear. Mankind earned one thing; death. God graciously gave something else; life. The word *charisma* is therefore critical in the understanding of how believers are to approach the acknowledgement of any gifts operating in their lives. It is not helpful in delineating the use and administration of spiritual gifts.

The word *phanerosis* (Φανερωσις) is frequently translated *manifestation* in the English textual translations of Scripture. It carries with it the idea of the Holy Spirit *shining through* the believer. The believer functions as a willing participant

⁵³ Stanley Horton, *What the Bible Says About the Holy Spirit* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1976), 261-262.

who is available to be used by God for His purposes and for the greater good of those receiving the gift. The Apostle Paul uses the word *phanerosis* when he says of his own ministry, “Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (1 Corinthians 4:1-2 KJV). Paul says he is not hiding anything, nor manipulating anyone, rather the spirit of Truth is manifest (shining through him as a conduit to them; i.e. *phanerosis*) so they can see and learn and come to faith in Christ.

As it applies to spiritual gifts and service in the Kingdom, *phanerosis* then applies to gifts which are resident in the Holy Spirit and under the control of the Holy Spirit. The responsibility of believers in those gifts associated with *phanerosis* administration is to be available for the Holy Spirit’s use. Hence, 1 Corinthians 12:7-8 RSV says, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit.” The gift is resident in the Spirit. It is administered for the common good of the body and is according to His knowledge of a specific need at a specific time.

The third koine Greek word used in the New Testament as regards distribution of gifts is *didomi* (δίδωμι). It is translated “gave” in Ephesians 4:11 and is “a prolonged form of the primary verb, to bestow or grant”⁵⁴ Other uses of the word *didomi* in the New Testament include Matthew 1:25 where two of the early actions of Mary and Joseph are described. Mary is said to have had no union with Joseph until

⁵⁴ Strong, G1325.

she “gave (*didomi*) birth” to her son. Joseph “gave (*didomi*) the baby the name Jesus.”

In both cases, the picture is not an image of a temporary administration. These were long term actions. Another clear example is found in Matthew 2:16 where Herod gave (*didomi*) the order to kill all the young male babies in an attempt to kill the Christ child. Clearly that “gave” had long term impact as it was an order to be carried out on the pain of death. Perhaps the most profound use of *didomi* in Scripture is John 3:16 RSV “For God so loved the world that he gave (*didomi*) his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” The permanence of that gift is apparent to all who carry the name fully-devoted follower of Christ.

Based in that understanding, spiritual gifts can be categorized along the lines of operation and administration.

All spiritual gifts are *charisma* gifts, in that they are given by the grace of God. No believer can boast about a gift seen operating in his life, since he is merely the recipient of it by grace.

Phanerosis gifts are those found in 1 Corinthians 12:9-11 where their operation is administered by the Spirit. These gifts include the word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, distinguishing of spirits, speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues spoken. These gifts are resident in the Holy Spirit and administered for the good of the whole body according to His wisdom. Our role as believers is to be available as a conduit for their operation. Since they are not in our control, we have no responsibility to attempt to possess or develop those gifts. Believers have the responsibility to live holy lives which positions them for use by the Holy Spirit. Paul says, “For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy

life” (1 Thessalonians 4:7). These believers do have control over their own faculties in the use of the gifts and are therefore responsible for the orderly operation of them as defined by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 14.

Didomi gifts are mentioned in numerous places throughout Scripture. They are gifts of a more permanent nature, given to believers over a longer term. As such, believers are responsible to identify any gifts they might have, develop those gifts to their fullest potential and give account for their use to the Master one day. *Didomi* gifts include leadership gifts such as apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher (Ephesians 4:11). They include ministry gifts such as hospitality (1 Peter 4:9-10), celibacy (1 Corinthians 13:3), poverty (1 Corinthians 13:3), martyrdom (1 Corinthians 13:3), missions (Ephesians 3:6-7), and craftsmanship (Exodus 39:8). Believers are specifically admonished to use the gifts of service, teaching, encouraging, giving, leadership and mercy (Romans 12:6-8) as they recognize they have been given (*didomi*) any of them. There are numerous other gifts implied in Scripture as well; i.e. music and intercession among them.

Table 3 below reveals one approach to the difference between the operation of *phanerosis* and *didomi* gifts.

Table 3. A Comparison of Responsibilities Based in the Type of Gift⁵⁵

<i>Didomi</i>	<i>Phanerosis</i>
Permanent	Situational
Related to talents	Unrelated to talents
Directs to position in the church	Little to do with position in the church
Responsible to discover, develop and use	Responsible to be available for the Lord's use

Paul's application of this theology is highly pragmatic. He writes, "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; ⁸if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully" (Romans 12:6-8). James says it even more succinctly, "faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:17 NKJV).

Responsibility at the *Leading/Parent* Level

Someone has to accept the responsibility to provide the leadership needed at each level of church members' growth toward fruitful maturity in Christ. Church leaders have specific responsibility to provide training, support structures and means for mature Christians to develop their leadership potential. The topic of leadership development is a discipline all its own and is not being addressed in this research project. It is included here to show the full cycle of a disciple coming to faith in Christ, growing in his faith, finding his niche and serving in the body of Christ and eventually leading/parenting other to do the same.

⁵⁵ Herbert Carter, "Spiritual Gifts in the Church," (lecture, B. R. E., Heritage Bible College, Dunn, NC, 1979).

Conclusion

The journey of every fully-devoted-to-becoming-a-fruitfully-mature follower of Christ begins by *being/connecting* to God through His son, Jesus Christ. From there, *becoming/growing* toward fruitful maturity becomes the goal. This goal includes a desire to *do/serve* by being available to the Spirit. That service is best accomplished, for the common good of the body, through the believer's availability to *phanerosis* gifts as well as the discovery, development and deployment of any *didomi* gifts given. Ultimately, the goal is to accept the role of spiritual parent taking on the responsibility of assisting infant believers along their own journey.

Any rubric for spiritual formation intended to be a systemic, holistic process in a given church setting must encompass all four of these dynamics. Otherwise, the process has failed to address the full continuum of a believer's life from conversion to fruitful maturity.

CHAPTER 3

A REVIEW OF THE SPIRITUAL FORMATION PROCESS UTILIZED IN THE RESEARCH

Christian authors and leaders often focus on either evangelism or discipleship as their primary modus for ministry. Seldom do they take a holistic, systemic approach to the entire continuum of conversion to fruitful maturity in Christ. After years of shifting back and forth between these two foci—and recognizing the problems associated with doing so—this writer determined to adopt a systems-thinking approach to the issue. The goal was to develop a process for use among the congregants of WBCC that was designed to embrace both disciplines of evangelism and discipleship.

In 2003, WBCC's leaders adopted a process believing it to be a holistic means of addressing the needs of a congregation whose primary growth was coming from the conversion of area residents and whose need for spiritual formation was profound. The process included four primary planks.

The first plank was the development of trust environments where the Christian life could be role modeled by followers of Christ and explored by unsaved seekers of truth. The second plank was a method by which believers could assess their current level of maturity including the measurement of their maturity in Christian character traits to which all believers might aspire. The third plank was that of a control mechanism attached to the assessment process for the purpose of minimizing the bias that accompanies self-assessment. The fourth plank was a goal setting mechanism

designed to provide a system by which growing Christians would be intentional about developing Christ-like character in areas exposed as a result of the assessment process. These planks have not been tested to rigorous, academic standards. They are considered, by WBCC's leaders, to be useful in assisting WBCC's members in their spiritual journey toward maturity in Christ. The goal of this research project was to explore the efficacy of the process in the WBCC context.

As a part of this four plank process, the WBCC leaders also embraced a rubric for defining four stages of maturity through which believers would commit to grow. These stages of development were described from a human development perspective and drawn from the biblical record. Chapter Two of this document provides a biblical basis for these terms, i.e. infant, adolescent, adult and parent.

This chapter is intended to provide a basic understanding of the four planks associated with WBCC's process for spiritual formation from conversion-to-fruitful maturity.

The Four Planks of the WBCC Process

As stated above there are four primary planks in the process adopted by WBCC's leadership for spiritual formation. They are:

- Trust Environments
- Assessment
- Convergent Validity
- Goal Setting

The following is a brief description of each plank.

Plank One: Trust Environments

Trust is at the heart of reaching unsaved people with the truth of the Gospel. Paul told Titus that believers must “show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (Titus 2:10). It is only in a trust environment that unbelievers begin to ask the eternal questions for which believers are called to provide answers. Paul admonishes believers, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). Trust is equally essential in leading believers toward fruitful maturity in Christ. Anderson states it succinctly, “Therapeutic gains do not occur in a cultural or social vacuum.”¹

Paul admonishes believers that before accepting the responsibility or authority associated with leading others toward full maturity in Christ, they must be personally trustworthy. He writes,

If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap. Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. (1 Timothy 3:1-8)

¹ Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 236.

The overseers described in Paul's words are typically considered to be the character traits of formal leaders in the local church setting such as Elders or Deacons. These character traits may be aptly applied to any Christian who accepts the responsibility to provide leadership for another follower of Christ. Trust is essential to any such relationship regardless of the environment.

The first century church had two primary environments designed to create a trust atmosphere where seekers could find Truth in Christ and believers could learn and grow to be like Christ. Luke describes the early church, "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46-47). The temple courts allowed for the potential of large, public gatherings. House-to-house meetings allowed for small, intimate gatherings. These two environments—large public groups and small more private groups—helped outsiders look toward the Body of Christ with such favor that they chose to join the community of faith in massive numbers. The early church grew dramatically, numbering in the thousands in a very short period of time and spreading to the known world in one generation.

The decline of the modern American church (as described in Chapter One), begs the question, "Could such a world-changing dynamic be repeated in modern times?" Research into the answer to that question began in earnest in the late 1960's. It was catapulted to national attention primarily by way of a work published by Donald McGavran in 1970. McGavran, and his colleagues, ultimately launched a

church growth movement based in reaching unsaved people. McGavran proposed that evangelism had not taken place until a person was actually incorporated into the body of Christ in a meaningful and measurable way. His proposition led to a definition of evangelism as “an enterprise devoted to proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and to persuading men to become His disciples and dependable members of His church.”² He rejected the notion that conversion had taken place merely because someone had come to an altar at a mass crusade or had signed a commitment card at a street rally. For McGavran evangelism had not happened until the person in question had been assimilated into a community of faith. His research became the philosophical underpinnings for four decades of research since that time.

By the early 1980’s American research in this field became much more pragmatic. Prolific writers such as Wagner began to write about the vital signs of a healthy church.³ Fuller Theological Seminary became the bastion of church growth thought and spawned a plethora of teachers, practitioners and writers. George took an institutional and organizational approach to his writings. He explained how to structure a church so as to facilitate trust relationships in spite of burgeoning size.⁴ His approach seemed to mirror closely that of the first century church described above. George challenged that the only way to break through what he called church

² Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1970), 34.

³ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow: The 7 Vital Signs of a Healthy Church* (Pasadena: Fuller Evangelistic Association, Dept. of Church Growth, 1976).

⁴ Carl George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1991).

growth barriers was to develop both large and small group environments.⁵ For George, Comiskey,⁶ Neighbor,⁷ et al. these environments would need to mirror the two dynamics seen in the first Century Church in order to approximate the early church's success.

By the mid-1990's books on the topic of discovering the mind set of the unsaved and unchurched began to surface. If the modern church was going to win the trust of the unsaved masses, it would need to start by understanding their mistrust.

One of the early practitioners of this emerging ecclesiology was a Baptist minister fresh from seminary. Rick Warren and his family moved to Orange County, California in the early 1980's with this paradigm in mind. They were committed to starting a church designed to reach unchurched people. Their revolutionary concept was to design Sunday morning services as the primary environment for evangelism, creating other environments for Christian growth and development. He determined to learn all he could about his community before he launched the new church. He knew he would need to understand why they mistrusted the church before he could earn their trust.

Before the first service of what is now known as Saddleback Church Warren went door-to-door talking with hundreds of unchurched, unsaved people. Warren says as soon as he was confident that he was talking with an unchurched person he would seek his permission to ask five specific questions. The questions were:

⁵ Carl George with Warren Bird, *How to Break Church Growth Barriers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993).

⁶ Joel Comiskey, *The Church That Multiplies* (Morena Valley, CA: CCS Publishing, 2005).

⁷ Ralph Neighbor, *The Shepherd's Guidebook* (Houston: Touch Publications, 1992).

- What do you think is the greatest need in this area?
- Are you actively attending any church?
- Why do you think most people don't attend church?
- If you were going to look for a church to attend, what kind of things

would you be looking for?

- What advice can you give to a minister who really wants to be helpful to people? Is there anything I can do for you? ⁸

Warren compiled the results of his survey and concluded there were four things a church committed to reaching unchurched people would have to address if they hoped to build trust bridges to them. ⁹

- Respondents told him, "Church is boring, especially the sermons. The messages don't relate to my life." As a result, Warren determined the new churches services would be lively, contemporary and relevant to the issues these unsaved people were facing.

- They told him, "Church members are unfriendly to visitors. If I go to church I want to feel welcomed without being embarrassed." Warren therefore decided the members of this new church would be taught how to genuinely welcome newcomers. He would be careful not to embarrass newcomers by singling them out in any way. They would be given opportunity to be anonymous for a season while they explored the claims of Christ.

⁸ Richard Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 190-191.

⁹ Ibid., 191-192.

- He learned their belief that, “The church is more interested in my money than in me.” Warren emphasized biblical stewardship for the members and told newcomers not to feel obligated to give in the offering.
- Perhaps, closest to their hearts, they told Warren, “We worry about the quality of the church’s child care.” He determined there would be safe, first-class children’s systems in place before the new church held any public services.

The lack of trust was apparent in their candid responses. Warren’s commitment to win their trust was equally apparent. As of this writing, Saddleback Church has reached, and incorporated into the life of the church, tens of thousands of formerly unsaved and unchurched people. Recent quotes from Warren suggest that more than 20,000 people typically attend one of the weekend services at Saddleback and that as many as 70% of those attenders were water baptized at that church.¹⁰ They have created environments during the week designed to address the spiritual and educational needs of the members. Saddleback Church leaders had developed a mind set and corresponding methodology to reach the unsaved in their context.

As effective as Saddleback and other similar churches had been, the tragic fact remained that church attendance among Americans continued to fall throughout the 1990’s. Rainer reports that average church attendance in 1991 America was approximately 49% while attendance in Sunday services by 1999 had dropped to 41%.¹¹ Research had to continue.

¹⁰ Richard Warren, (lecture, Purpose Driven Life seminar, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, 2003).

¹¹ Thom Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 109.

Rainer decided it was time to take a different approach to researching the issue. He writes, “I am grateful for the years of research on the unchurched by outstanding Christian leaders and even some secular writers. This book does not attempt to diminish the value of their contributions. Indeed, some of their findings are used in the context of this book. My concern, however, is that we need to focus some of our questions and research on a group that has been largely ignored—the formerly unchurched.”¹² Rainer goes on to explain his concern.

The problem with this approach is that as many as 80 to 90 percent of this group many never attend church. In other words, we could be developing strategies to reach a sector of the population, which, despite our best efforts, will never attend church. Why not ask questions of those who did make the transition from the unchurched to the church? Why not ask what influenced them to come to church and perhaps to become Christians? Since they were the receptive and responsive people, perhaps the principles we learn from reaching the formerly unchurched can be applied to reaching the presently unchurched.¹³

Rainer’s research led him to conclude there are several primary factors that must be considered in effectively building trust bridges to the American unsaved, unchurched population. He isolated fifteen specific issues to address. These issues arose from the analysis of his research done among more than 2,000 evangelistically effective churches.¹⁴ The research included interviews with 353 previously unchurched, 350 longer-term Christians and 100 pastors. The research has been endorsed by a veritable Who’s Who of modern evangelical thought including, Elmer Towns of Liberty University, Timothy George of the Besson Divinity School of

¹² Ibid., 20.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 23.

Samford University, T. W. Wilson of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, C. Peter Wagner of the Wagner Leadership Institute, Daniel Akin of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Gary McIntosh of Biola University and a plethora of others.

The issues Rainer isolated were:

1. Majoring on the majors
2. Maintaining a conservative Biblical theology
3. Making evangelism the church's priority and passion
4. Providing relevant Biblical teaching
5. Offering effective small groups
6. Discerning patterns of relationships in the church
7. Maintaining clean, up-to-date facilities
8. Developing a user-friendly greeter ministry
9. Keeping friendliness before the church
10. Seeking excellence
11. Providing an inquirer's or new member's class
12. Expecting much from the members
13. Knowing the church's purposes
14. Fostering ministry involvement
15. Never forgetting the power of prayer.¹⁵

¹⁵ Ibid., 223-231.

All of these issues must be addressed—in each church’s context—in the effective development of the environments essential to the holistic view of spiritual formation being discussed in this research project.

None of these conclusions are without their critics. Klenck in a paper published under the name “What’s Wrong with the 21st Century Church?” believes the “foundational thinking of the Church Growth Movement to be based on the Hegelian dialectic.”¹⁶ Klenck believes the church growth movement to be no more than “the utilization of modern marketing techniques by the church, in order to draw and hold large numbers of people by meeting their felt needs.”¹⁷ He rightly warns, when a “diverse group of people (believers and non-believers—thesis and antithesis) gather in a facilitated meeting (with a trained facilitator/group leader), using group dynamics (peer pressure), to discuss a social issue (or dialogue the Word of God) and reach a predetermined outcome (consensus or compromise), that all are comfortable with—then the message of the Word of God has been watered down, and the participants have been conditioned to accept (and even celebrate) their compromise.”¹⁸

Klenck’s concern for weakening the faith and watering down the Word of God must be considered. Church leaders committed to reaching the unchurched masses with the Gospel must guard against lowering the standard of holiness in hopes of filling their churches. Small group leaders, typically serving without the benefit of

¹⁶ Robert Klenck, “What’s Wrong with the 21st Century Church: How Diaprax Manifests Itself in the Church,” <http://www.crossroad.to/News/Church/Klenck3.html> (accessed 2003).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

formal biblical training, must have significant support and accountability to ensure the maintenance of biblical standards.

Klenck's assertion that the church growth movement embraces the notion that watering down the gospel is an appropriate technique in evangelism is unfounded. On the contrary, every indication is that the authors cited in this research agree with the Apostle Paul when he says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Romans 1:16).

The churches Rainer considered to be evangelistically effective had to understand the mind-set of those they were committed to reach. They had to develop environments that would attract unsaved people. Those environments had to be staffed by fully devoted followers of Christ committed to earn their trust.

WBCC's Trust Environments

WBCC leaders decided that, in its context, the two primary environments designed to complete the spiritual formation cycle would be large group services at the church's facility on Sunday mornings and small group gatherings in homes during the week. Each of these environments would have their own unique role in the continuum.

The large group gatherings—termed Sunday Celebrations—would be open to the public. It was believed that anointed worship and biblical preaching on issues relevant to Christian living would facilitate personal spiritual growth for the members. However, the primary role of the large group gatherings would be serve as

environments at which unsaved people would lower their emotional guard sufficiently to explore the claims of Christ and, hopefully, find personal faith in Him. This decision meant addressing several systems within the environment. The following is a brief description of those systems.

First, an atmosphere of acceptance would be presented to all prospective members as a core value of the church.¹⁹ Unsaved, unchurched people often have preconceived negative ideas about church. Those ideas often include an expectation of judgmentalism and personal rejection. A recent newcomer unwittingly communicated the church's apparent success at fulfilling that goal. Upon approaching the facilities on a Sunday morning he whispered to a greeter, "I heard this is a church where people like me can come."

The worship dynamics sought after would utilize a music style to which the unsaved, unchurched of the area could relate. Contextual research determined that the most popular radio stations among initial respondents had a pop-rock format.²⁰ It was subsequently decided that contemporary music styles would be exclusively utilized for the public services of the church. Some classic hymns would be used, but still presented with a contemporary flavor.

The preaching pastors would not be limited in the terms of the subjects they addressed. Any topic could be presented from a Pentecostal/Evangelical perspective, from the stages of WBCC. However, all speakers would be required to address their

¹⁹ A membership orientation class called "Fresh Start in Life" is a prerequisite for membership. One of the core values taught is that "Open Acceptance." Open Acceptance is defined as loving people unconditionally while helping them to find Christ and grow up to be like Him.

²⁰ 89% of the early respondents to WBCC's opening services were unsaved and unchurched before coming. Attendees were surveyed for psychographic data for the first several Sundays. It was determined that Classic Rock and Soft Rock format radio stations were the most popular among that group.

selected topics in a way that a biblically illiterate person would understand what was being said.

Opportunities for accepting Christ would be provided every Sunday. These opportunities would be provided privately; leading the attendee in private prayer at his seat. They would also be provided publicly through open altars staffed with competent prayer counselors after each service. Both approaches would be presented in a way to minimize public embarrassment for those who sensed a desire to commit their lives to Christ. It was determined that public water baptismal services would be the primary mode for public confession of faith once a relationship with Christ was established.

These systems coupled with a casual atmosphere that includes a large public gathering area, coffee shop, book store and safe children's environments have served to create an inviting area for the unchurched of WBCC's constituent area. At the time of this writing nearly 2,000 people attend WBCC's Sunday morning celebrations with the church's growth continuing at four times that of the area population.²¹ Internal surveys reveal that nearly 60% of WBCC's members were unsaved and unchurched before joining the church. These surveys further suggest that approximately 6% of its Sunday morning attendees (more than 100 attendees on a typical Sunday) are seekers who have not yet made a personal commitment to Christ. More than 10,000 such seekers have given written notice of their commitment to Christ during the eighteen year history of the church.²² Given these statistics, this research focused primarily on the effectiveness of the small group environments provided by the church.

²¹ These statistics are revealed in Chapter Two, Table 2 of this document.

While some spiritual formation was deemed to be happening during Sunday morning services, by the mid-1990's it was determined by WBCC leaders that a second environment would be needed. WBCC historical data suggested that trust adequate to present the claims of Christ could be established in the large celebration environments. However, the level of trust needed for Christians to seek answers for their deepest questions and honestly ask for help in breaking the strongholds of their lives is much deeper. Building trust on that more intimate level would require a more intimate setting, i.e. small home groups.

Comiskey agrees. He relates one pastor's experience, "I didn't know I had so many dysfunctional people in my church until we started small group ministry. It's as if I lifted up a wet log in a dark forest, only to see bugs scurrying everywhere."²³ Comiskey comments, "Those same needy people sat in Pastor John's church every Sunday wearing suits and ties, and outwardly everything seemed proper and in order. But as they began to interact with one another in the small group environment, their needs, hurts and disappointments surfaced. People cannot hide in small group."²⁴

It was determined that follow-up on those who communicated a commitment to Christ in one of the Sunday services would be done by the church's small group leaders. Follow-up would include an invitation to become a part of one of the church's home-based small groups. The goal of each group would be to assimilate these new converts into a small trust environment for spiritual formation toward

²² Gleaned from records maintained by the WBCC administrative staff.

²³ Joel Comiskey, *The Spirit-Filled Small Group: Leading Your Group to Experience the Spiritual Gifts* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 2005), 65.

²⁴ Ibid.

fruitful maturity. McIntosh writes, “Pathways of belonging are strategically designed ministries that assist new people in gaining a sense of being a part of your church. Recognizing that people are living without salvation in Jesus Christ and outside the church, we want to help them walk along a pathway that leads them to Christ. The pathway began when they first became aware of your church, which led to their initial visit, then to their feeling well served through your various ministries, and finally to their involvement in the church.”²⁵ As WBCC grew numerically beyond the point where every member could realistically know every other member, it was decided that small group leaders would be the most effective at creating those pathways.

Once assimilated into the life of one of WBCC’s small groups, the group leader would function as the spiritual parent of his/her spiritual children. The leader/parent’s primary goal would be the growth and development to fruitful maturity of each member of the group. Hull defines these types of small groups as “an intentional gathering of three to fourteen people who meet on a regular basis, with the common purpose of inviting the people they love to join them in discovering and growing in the adventure of a Christ-honoring life-style at work, in family life, and with extended family members.”²⁶

In the ecclesiology of WBCC’s leaders, this would be essential, biblical Christianity. Bolsinger says,

What is the earliest result of the very first Christian sermon? Peter preached the gospel and Acts 2:41-42 says, “So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons

²⁵ Gary L. McIntosh, *Beyond the First Visit: The Complete Guide to Connecting Guests to Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 132.

²⁶ Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Church* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell. A Division of Baker Books, 1990), 245.

were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Not much "just JC and me" there. The earliest believer trusted the good news about Jesus and joined—through baptism—the fellowship of people who also trusted the message. They did not race home, have a personal quiet time and give up smoking, but instead "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (shared beliefs), "fellowship" (shared relationships), "breaking of bread" (shared meals) and "the prayers" (shared spiritual life).²⁷

Together these two trust environments—large group celebrations with a primary goal of evangelism along with small group communities with a primary goal of assimilation and discipleship—formed the trust environments where the entire spiritual formation continuum could potentially be realized. This research focused primarily on the small group environment's impact on spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity.

Plank Two: The Assessment Process

Once WBCC leaders believed they had created sufficient environments for the full continuum of spiritual formation to take place, a second question had to be answered. How will those who choose to participate in these environments measure their respective levels of maturity or recognize supposed growth toward Christ-like character? It was determined that a means of regular assessment would need to be found.

Church leaders set out to find an assessment tool that would address several dynamics. First, they wanted to help members identify personal growth in the Christian character traits delineated in Chapter Two of this document. They desired to

²⁷ Tod E. Bolsinger, *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian: How the Community of God Transforms Lives* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, a division of Baker House, 2004), 71.

provide a means for members to assess their current level of spiritual maturity. They equally wanted to provide a meaningful process by which members could minimize the bias often associated with self-assessment. They also deemed it vital to provide a mechanism for setting personal spiritual goals for continued spiritual growth toward fruitful maturity. After significant research, leaders felt that no validated tool existed that addressed all of those issues. It was decided that such a tool would have to be crafted. The task of developing the Christian Maturity Assessment Tool described below was accepted and is attached as Appendix 2.

Assessing Christian Character Development

Chapter Two of this document describes the thirteen primary character traits utilized in the WBCC spiritual formation process. The assessment tool utilized was designed to isolate specific attitudes and actions that suggest internalization of each of these thirteen character traits. The assessment process has not been subjected to rigorous academic testing. Future studies are recommended for that purpose. The process is deemed by church leaders, to provide a useful snap shot of church member's personal development in these areas.

There are several dynamics associated with the assessment process.

- Each of the fifty-two statements presented in the assessment are written in sufficiently basic language as to be understandable to Christians at every level of maturity. This was deemed essential in order that infant Christians could accurately self-assess their personal development.

- Each of the fifty-two statements is worded so as to relate to actual participation in specific activities. Respondents reflect on each statement and select a number that corresponds to their current level of activity in that area. If the respondent “Almost Never” participates in that activity or relates to that attitude the appropriate response is “1.” If the respondent “Almost Always” does so, the answer is “5.” By designing each question around actual activity and current attitudes, objectivity is deemed to be maximized and subjective bias minimized.
- Once all fifty-two statements are responded to the results are transferred to the chart provided. Each column is subsequently totaled and the results are transferred to the provided graph.
- The graph is intended to provide a visual aid by which respondent’s can discover areas of development upon which to focus during the goal setting phase of the spiritual formation process.

Assessing Stages of Christian Maturity

While growth in specific Christian character traits is considered desirable, a general sense of movement toward fruitful maturity is believed to be equally useful. As a result, the assessment tool is also designed to point toward the respondent’s current stage of Christian maturity.

Chapter Two of this document provides a glimpse into WBCC’s theology of Christian maturity. It also introduces the terms utilized in this research to delineate stages along the trajectory toward fruitful maturity in Christ. Defining those stages is deemed to be an effective mechanism for inspiring members to continue in their

growth. It is also believed to assist respondent's in seeking out appropriate areas of service in the Body of Christ. Defining stages, however, is a complex prospect addressed in current literature from a wide array of approaches.

Bennett asserts, "A good disciple-making blueprint may be detailed or fairly simple, but it must be biblical."²⁸ He goes on to define three stages of development against the backdrop of the commitments, competencies, character and convictions required at each stage of development: infant, adult and parent.²⁹

Fowler presents three dimensions of faith development.³⁰ "First, faith is a dimension of the activity of knowing. In line with Baldwin, Dewey, Piaget, Kohlberg and other cognitive-developmentalists, Fowler sees knowing as an activity: the composing, construing, or constructing that an active subject engages in, wherein both self and other are known."³¹ The second dimension of faith development for Fowler is "a knowing which involves both self-formation and rational analysis."³² He "grounds this discussion in a distinction between what he calls the logic of rational certainty and the logic of conviction."³³ "The third characteristic of faith...is its relational character."³⁴ Fowler writes, "The developmentally earliest manifestation

²⁸ Ron Bennett, *Intentional Disciplemaking: Cultivating Spiritual Maturity in the Local Church* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2001), 27.

²⁹ Ibid., 31.

³⁰ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper, 1981).

³¹ Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks, *Faith Development and Fowler* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1986), 206.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 207.

³⁴ Ibid.

of the relational character of faith, citing Erikson, is found in the parent-infant relationship. Through parental patterns of care, pre-linguistic experience of the world as trustworthy or capricious, present to the self or absent to the self, caring or indifferent, form the nascent (but forever powerful) faith-knowing of the child.”³⁵

Fowler also describes seven stages in the process beginning with what he terms “Primal Faith”³⁶ which is formed soon after appearing from the womb. He concludes with “Universalizing Faith” in which “the person lives in paradox and in the tension of ironic consciousness and commitment.”³⁷ He writes, “The goal is not for everyone to reach the stage of universalizing faith. Rather, it is for each person or group to open themselves, as radically as possible—within the structures of their present stage or transition—to synergy with Spirit. The dynamics of that openness—and the extraordinary openings that come occasionally with ‘saving grace’—operate as lure and power toward ongoing growth in partnership with Spirit and in the direction of universalizing faith.”³⁸

Barna suggests that fully-devoted followers of Christ are “assured of their salvation by Grace alone.” He refers to them as disciples who “understand the principles of the Christian life,” “obey God’s laws and commands,” “represent God in the world,” “serve others,” and “reproduce themselves in Christ.”³⁹

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 52.

³⁷ Ibid., 67.

³⁸ Dykstra and Parks, 75.

³⁹ George Barna, *Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 20-23.

Captain takes what he terms a “Psycho-Spiritual” approach to the challenge. He outlines eight stages of development: innocence, nurturance, obedience, behavior, motive, meaning, love and fruit. He sets each stage against a biblically parallel backdrop of the Garden of Eden, Adam to Noah, Noah to Moses, Moses to Prophets, Prophets to Christ, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit and God the Father⁴⁰ as Table 4 displays below.

Table 4. Biblical Eras Juxtaposed with Human Development

Biblical Era	Biblical Stage of Human Development	Ages
Garden of Eden	Innocence	Baby in womb
Adam to Noah	Nurturance	0-2
Noah to Moses	Obedience	2-6
Moses to Prophets	Behavior	6-12
Prophets to Christ	Motive	12-20
God the Son	Meaning	20-30
God the Holy Spirit	Love	25-45
God the Father	Fruit	40-

Captain asserts,

We acknowledge, as did Freud, that man is a biological being, but as Christians we believe that we are more than just a body. We also acknowledge, along with Erikson, that man is a social being in need of human relationships, but this is still an insufficient viewpoint for building a theory of human development that will help us understand man’s most basic psychological needs. The missing element in both of these theories is the fact that man is at root a spiritual being created by God in His image.⁴¹

Captain’s attempt to marry the disciplines of theology and psychology is worthy of consideration for future studies. They are founded in the Biblical record

⁴⁰ Philip A. Captain, *Eight Stages of Christian Growth Human Development in Psycho-Spiritual Terms* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 12.

⁴¹ Ibid., 1-2.

while not neglecting the accepted psychological studies of Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg and others.

The works of Bennett, Fowler, Barna, Captain et al. are just a glimpse into the range of thoughts on the subject. It is believed that these models of delineation, along with the plethora of others in modern literature, have much credence and value for the clinician and practitioner alike.

For the purposes of providing a holistic, spiritual formation process for WBCC members, church leaders determined to utilize the biblical terms described in Chapter Two, i.e. infant, adolescent, adult and parent. These terms were selected because of the biblical basis for them and the simplicity of communication to the average congregant they provide.

The mechanism for assessing a respondent's current stage of maturity is imbedded in the assessment tool itself. It is therefore invisible to the average respondent until all statements have been responded to and total scores calculated. As described above, the assessment process is comprised of four rounds of thirteen statements associated with the thirteen character traits being assessed. Each round of four statements is designed to progress in intensity. In other words, as the respondent progresses through the statements, a higher and higher level of Christian maturity is required to achieve a high score.

It is speculated that an infant Christian will typically answer *often* or *almost always* to the first round of four statements. For instance, statement two says, "I am emotionally aware of the fact that Jesus died for my sin." It is believed that any fully-devoted follower of Jesus Christ will potentially respond with a high number to that

statement, regardless of his current level of maturity. On the other hand, statement five says, “I have a desire to meet the needs around me.” This statement can be answered with a high number by most fully-devoted followers of Christ. However, infant Christians often are still highly focused on their own needs. They have not moved to focusing on the needs of others. Therefore, an infant Christian will likely respond with a lower number to that statement.

By the time respondents reach the final round of statements, only those who have reached the parent level of maturity will be able to respond with a high number. For instance, statement 52 says, “I teach others biblical principles.” Only those mature enough in their faith to accept responsibility for leading others, i.e. parents, should respond with a high number to this statement.

This progressive intensity is believed to weight each response in such a way as to determine the respondent’s level of maturity through the cumulative score derived. Once all responses are transferred to the scoring grid and summed, the cumulative score is transferred to a chart that points to the current level of maturity. Respondents read the chart to determine their current level. The chart depicts the following levels: Infant 52-95, Teen 96-150, Adult 151-205, Parent 206-260. These levels should not be considered definitive direction on current level of maturity. They are highly subjective and have not been subjected to rigorous academic research. They are believed to be indicators of movement when compared to annual assessments over a period of years.

Plank Three: A Control Mechanism

It is well-documented that the very concept of a self-report is fraught with problems. Murray quotes the 1946 article written by Meehl and Hathway, often described as the empirical manifesto, “One of the most important factors of almost all structured...tests is their susceptibility to ‘faking’ or ‘lying’ in one way or another, as well as their even greater susceptibility to unconscious self-deception and role-playing on the part of individuals who may be consciously quite honest and sincere in their responses.”⁴² Murray reports the less mature the respondent is the more defensive they tend to be. The more mature the more humble. He recommends including some form of control mechanism, designed to produce convergent validity. Convergent validity is a term used to describe the validating results of this control mechanism when applied to the previous results of self-assessment. Convergent Validity is deemed to increase confidence in the final result by minimizing either defensiveness or undue humility.

The control mechanism built into this assessment tool is revealed in a second column for answers. Respondent’s are told the most accurate picture of their current Christian maturity only comes after sitting down with a trusted friend or spiritual leader to discuss their answers. This meeting is termed an *affirmation meeting*. The conclusion reached after the affirmation meeting is termed convergent validity.

⁴² William Murray, *The Illusion of Spiritual Maturity and Self-Reports of Spiritual Maturity in Seminary Students* (La Mirada, CA: Biola University Press, 2001), 47-48.

Covey terms this type of interaction “Synergistic Communication.”⁴³ He reports, “When you communicate synergistically, you are simply opening your mind and heart and expression to new possibilities, new alternatives, new options. You’re not sure when you engage in synergistic communication how things will work out or what the end will look like, but you do have an inward sense of excitement and security and adventure, believing that it will be significantly better than it was before.”⁴⁴

The trusted friend or leader providing affirmation is not there to challenge the respondent’s answers. His goal is affirmation of the respondent concluding in an increased confidence in the conclusions reached as a result of the assessment process. The affirmation partner’s role is to provide peer level feedback by asking objective questions such as, “How did you arrive at your answer?” “Can you give me an example of when you had this experience?” These statements put the respondent in a position to support his answer. Answers arrived upon in the self-test that don’t stand up to that level of scrutiny are adjusted accordingly. This is designed to produce the most accurate picture possible. It also serves to expose the level of defensiveness or undue humility the respondent has demonstrated in answering the statements. It is theorized that this process develops a feedback loop in the evaluation of each participant and adds to the validity of the case studies. It is further theorized that this level of peer feedback is better received by the participant when done in the context of the above described trust environment of a small group.

⁴³ Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 264.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Plank Four: Goal Setting

The fourth plank in WBCC's spiritual formation process is a facility for personal goal setting. The assessment tool includes charts for capturing both the self-test answers and the affirmation meeting answers. These answers are designed to be transferred to the graph in a unique color or style. This facilitates a comparison between the self-assessment and the affirmed assessment. The graph is designed to provide a visual aid for identifying areas to be targeted for spiritual growth goals. It also serves to provide a visional aid depicting a general sense of movement toward spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity when compared with multiple annual assessments when completed.

It is proposed that the affirmation meeting is not complete until personal goal setting is complete.⁴⁵ Without a specific goal setting process, the assessment of Christian maturity is an academic exercise. It has some merit on its face, but lacks the means to produce spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity. The fulfillment of goals represents the transformation that is the ultimate goal of any biblically defined spiritual formation process.

The goal setting process utilized in WBCC's system is designed to follow the one utilized in Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary's D. Min. Christian Leadership "Learning Covenant."

The goal setting phase of the process includes four primary elements.

First, participants set one or two specific goals. These goals answer the question, "What do I feel called to accomplish?" These goals are often based on the

⁴⁵ The goal setting process may or may not occur at the same time as the affirmation meeting. This is dependant on the participant's sense of direction toward the areas God is calling him to grow.

lower scores achieved in the assessment, but may not be always be the case. However the goal is arrived at, the process requires the participant to be specific about what he feels calls to do.

The second element of the goal setting process includes a statement of purpose. This statement is intended to answer the question, “Why am I committing to accomplish this goal?” Answering that question is designed to provide inspiration to stay on task.

Senge suggests,

A useful starting exercise for learning how to focus more clearly on desired results is to take any particular goal or aspect of your vision. First imagine that that goal is fully realized. Then ask yourself the question, “If I actually had this, what would it get me?” What people often discover is that the answer to that question reveals “deeper” desires lying behind the goal. In fact, the goal is actually an interim step they assume is necessary to reach a more important result.⁴⁶

This deeper understanding serves as a motivator for the goal-setter to stay on task. The third element of the goal setting process requires participants to articulate the means of accomplishing the goal. At this point participants are answering the question, i.e. “How do I plan to accomplish the goal?” The means of accomplishing the goal should include the person who will provide support and accountability. In the WBCC system, this taps into the power of the small group environment. The small group leader/spiritual parent is in the ideal position to provide support and accountability throughout the term of the goal. These leader/parents may also opt to pair group members up as accountability partners for this journey toward fruitful maturity.

⁴⁶ Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Currency Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1960), 164-165.

The fourth element calls for a completion date. This element answers the question, “When do I project to have accomplished this goal? The amount of time varies depending on the aggressiveness of the respondent and the intensity of the goals set. The amount of time selected is not as critical as the fact that a specific amount of time is set for each goal. Without specific time frames, current pressures tend to push the loftiest goals out of view.

Together the four elements of the goal setting system serve to give direction to the respondent’s journey toward maturity in Christ. It has been said the only direction one can coast is downhill. If growth is desired, goal setting is vital. Sink writes, “Goals guide and direct behavior, and herein lies the true motivational, performance, and productivity improvement power associated with goal setting processes.”⁴⁷

An Important Perspective on WBCC’s Process

Spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity is not about what people *do* as much as it is about who they are *becoming*. God’s highest purpose for the crowning achievement of His creation is “that we become like His Son” (Romans 8:29). Yet any system requires a means of measurement for evaluating whether participants are progressing through it. Those measurements are often more about what participants do than who they are. WBCC’s process is no exception. Add to that there are few

⁴⁷ Scott D. Sink, *Productivity Management: Planning, Measurement and Evaluation, Control and Improvement* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1985), 343.

things in the human experience that defines a person's sense of self-worth more than what he does.

Therein lies an underlying tension that must be factored into any spiritually transforming process. The doing must be an outgrowth of who participants are becoming. One can do all the right things, know all the right things, and yet never develop a Christ-like attitude and spirit. In that case, spiritual formation has not happened.

This is not to say that what a person does is not important. It is, in fact, essential to the human equation. Fowler writes "The adult who fails to find ways of contributing to the nurture of culturally significant strength in the species forfeits his or her place in the cycle of the generations. This can begin the regression to an obsessive need of pseudo-intimacy, with a pervading sense of stagnation and person impoverishment. Such individuals often begin to indulge themselves as if they were their own—or one another's—one and only child."⁴⁸ Healthy individuals understand Fowler's posited potential and attempt to find meaning and purpose in whatever it is that they do.

Fowler illustrates this with a conversation with he had with an assistant professor of history at a prestigious American university. He challenged the professor with the suggestion that he was teaching history to a group of financially well-endowed individuals who would one day merely return to their family wealth. The professor rose to his full height and replied,

I am a teacher of history. My field of expertise is nineteenth-century British labor movements. My purpose in teaching here is to use the

⁴⁸ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 85.

subject matter of my field and the methods of my discipline to contribute all that I can to a process of detoxification for young men and women who are likely to be people of power and influence in this society and who all their lives have been mainlining on this culture's images of success and power.⁴⁹

Whether the professor was succeeding in his stated purpose is open for debate. However, a rationale for what he was giving his life too was clearly essential to his own sense of self-worth and meaningful place in the world.

Palmer puts this assertion into a Biblical context when he suggests there are two primary Christian motivators for doing work. Palmer writes, "First, God created human beings to work. Consider the two accounts of creation in the first chapters of Genesis. In Genesis 1:26 we read that God created human beings as male and female to 'rule over' all the earth. Two verses later God blessed the first human pair and commanded them to 'subdue' the earth and 'rule over' all living beings. 'Dominion,' which can be exercised only through work, is the purpose for which God created human beings."⁵⁰ He continues, "For the Greeks, living like gods meant living without work. For the Hebrews, living like God meant having meaningful work. The most striking feature of the Old Testament account of creation is not so much that human beings are meant to work, but that God works. The first time the word work occurs in the Bible it does not refer to human work but to divine work: 'By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work' (Genesis 2:2)."⁵¹

⁴⁹ Fowler, *Becoming Christian, Becoming Adult*, 128.

⁵⁰ Michael Palmer, Editor. *Elements of a Christian Worldview: Work*, Miroslav Volf (Springfield: Logion Press, 1998), 222.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 223-224.

Palmer's second primary motivator for work is "we work because God gifts and calls us to work. We should expect that God who has created human beings to work will also impart to them gifts to do various tasks and call them to these tasks."⁵² "When we come to the New Testament, the first thing to note is that all God's people are gifted and called to various tasks by the Spirit of God, not just special people like temple artisans, kings or prophets."⁵³

Palmer concludes,

If God created people to work and if God endows them with gifts to accomplish various tasks two important consequences follow. First, work is not merely a means to an end. It is not simply a chore to be endured for the sake of meeting needs and satisfying desires. Because work is essential to our humanity, work also has an intrinsic value. Second, all types of work have equal dignity. Religious work (such as preaching or teaching in a seminary) is not better than secular work (such as baking bread or building bridges); both are equally good if done in response to the gift and the call of the Spirit of God.⁵⁴

While Folwer, Palmer, Volf et al. agree with the importance of discovering personal meaning in vocation, the weakness in identifying what a participant does as a means of assessing spiritual maturity remains.

The danger of a sense of self-worth derived from the discovery of calling, Divine giftedness and personal effort lies in the word "self." Becoming Christ-like is the goal. Christ was not focused on himself at all. Paul writes, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very

⁵² Ibid., 224.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 225.

nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8).

Missing that vital perspective is what led to tensions at the Lord’s last supper with His disciples. Luke writes “a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest” (Luke 22:24). Jesus’ response to their selfishness was to wrap himself in a towel and wash their feet. His act was so profound it shook the disciples to their core. Macchia writes, “Even within sight of the cross, we find the humanness of the disciples oozing out of their most intimate of community experiences. It may very well have been their argument among themselves that led Jesus to perform such a dramatic act. The juxtaposition of his servanthood demonstrated with greater clarity the self-centeredness of the disciples. Maybe having their feet washed would wake them up to the reality of Jesus’ expectations for them.”⁵⁵

Warren asserts that discovery of purpose and meaning, while focusing on self is impossible. He writes,

Self-help books, even Christian ones, usually offer the same predictable steps to finding your life’s purpose: Consider your dreams. Clarify your values. Set some goals. Figure out what you are good at. Aim high. Go for it! Be disciplined. Believe you can achieve your goals. Involved others. Never give up. Of course these recommendations often lead to great success. You can usually succeed in reaching a goal if you put your mind to it. But being successful and fulfilling your life’s purpose are not at all the same issue! You could reach all your personal goals, becoming a raving

⁵⁵ Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple: Ten Traits of a Vital Christian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books. A Division of Baker Book House, Co., 2004.), 129.

success by the world's standard, and still miss the purposes for which God created you. You need more than self-help advice.⁵⁶

He says, "Many people try to use God for their own self-actualization, but that is a reversal of nature and is doomed to failure. You were made for God, not vice versa, and life is about letting God use you for his purposes, not your using him for your own purpose."⁵⁷

The ultimate goal of spiritual formation to fruitful maturity is captured in the Apostle Paul's words, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). There is no doubt of Paul's sense of mission; but, his mission was not merely a means of self-actualization. His mission was an act of worship. He writes, "However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace" (Acts 20:24) .

Any biblically defined, effective process for spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity will include the measurement of activity and achievement. It will have a "doing" element to it. However, it must ultimately focus on who participants are becoming in the journey.

⁵⁶ Richard Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth am I here for?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2002), 19.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 18.

Summary

The journey from conversion to fruitful maturity starts with someone sharing the Gospel and moves to the sinner coming to personal faith in Christ. After that, the convert is trained and disciplined towards Christian maturity. In time this growing follower of Christ goes out and wins another soul to Christ committing to help this new believer grow in his personal faith in Christ. This cyclic process reproduces itself indefinitely. The case studies in this research project are designed to evaluate whether, in fact, the four plank process adopted by WBCC is effectively leading to the fulfillment of that cycle.

CHAPTER 4

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The task of evaluating Christian maturity is a complex process and at this juncture finds itself subjected to various anecdotal practices, but few validated studies. Consistent with the practice of the initial steps toward a validated study, this project explored six case studies and then ascertained the degree of convergence of the findings. Six case studies were chosen to make the study more rigid and to establish reliability of the design. The study was exploratory in nature and sought to create a better understanding of the process from conversion to fruitful maturity. The measurement tools used in this study were designed, based on experience and anecdotal data. They are therefore available for more rigorous investigating and testing.

Designing a modality¹ for assessing growth that evaluates the categories of Christian character is crucial. Defining levels of maturity biblically² and creating a meaningful process for setting measurable goals is another step in developing a holistic process. Developing a sodality³ in which trust relationships form, so as to facilitate convergent validity, are equally critical. Without both an effective modality and sodality, a process for spiritual toward fruitful maturity may be academically interesting but it is weak at best, and potentially transformationally null. Trust

¹ For the purposes of this project, a modality is defined as the methodology utilized to facilitate spiritual formation.

² These categories and levels are defined for this research project in Chapter Two of this document.

³ For the purposes of this project, a sodality is defined as societal environment where meaningful trust relationships may form.

relationships and consistent processes therefore formed the basis of the case studies. If these are found to be true, then there is a dire need to develop a process by which individuals can be assessed in their journey from conversion to fruitful maturity.

The goal of this research project was explore the process of conversion to fruitful maturity through the experience of six purposefully selected participants. The study was done to evaluate the extent to which the process delineated in Chapter Two of this document effectively assists members of WBCC in their growth toward Christian maturity. The research included qualitative evaluation of the process and the tools used to measure each stage of the process.

It was determined that there were three elements essential to these case studies:

- 1) The selection of six church members who fit the primary profile of a typical WBCC member, thus serving as a valid representative group. Six participants were carefully chosen in an effort to ensure that they met all the criteria necessary to examine the stages from conversion to fruitful maturity. This sampling was important in an effort to explore the full range of experiences in persons deemed to be representative of the average congregant.

- 2) The development and use of a modality that included an assessment tool designed to measure Christian maturity, areas of Christian character for growth, a control mechanism designed to provide convergent validity and a personal goal setting process. This assessment tool was developed by the author to promote spiritual growth among the attendees at Western Branch

Community Church. These case studies anecdotally explore the use and effectiveness of the modality as a Christian maturity indicator.

3) The formation and maintenance of a sodality designed to become a trust environment which would facilitate growth and serve as a forum through which convergent validity could be achieved.

This is in keeping with Yin's observation that "A good case study investigator should make the effort to develop this theoretical framework."⁴

The following is a description of these three elements.

The Participants

The participants in this study were designed to be representative of the WBCC congregation. Demographic and psychographic surveys of the congregation⁵ have produced a basic profile of the average congregant. This explains the use of purposive sampling indicated in the design of this study as opposed to any random sampling, which may not provide a significant representative sample.

The average WBCC congregant is 42-years of age, has two years of college, works in a light blue collar job,⁶ and was unchurched for an average of twelve years before coming to WBCC. There are a wide range of denominational backgrounds represented; however, the highest representation is from Catholic, Baptist and

⁴ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods: 3rd Edition* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003), 33.

⁵ Demographic and psychographic surveys are circulated among congregants annually.

⁶ "Light blue collar job" is a term coined to describe a mid-level professional; i.e. engineer, teacher, shop supervisor, etc.

Pentecostal backgrounds. The congregation is equally divided between male and female members.

Participants in the representative group were selected utilizing a five-question survey distributed to members of WBCC.⁷ The questions were arbitrary and were developed based on the experience of the author in the process of the development of the church.

Question One of the survey was designed to identify those who were unchurched before coming to WBCC. Questions two, three and four were designed to isolate potential participants who demonstrated a deep appreciation for and commitment to the ministries of the Western Branch Community Church.⁸ Question Five was designed to identify potential participants who demonstrated a genuine desire to grow toward Christian maturity and who believed that growth could be best achieved in a small group environment.

A perusal of the surveys determined there were several individuals who fit the above criterion. Each of these applicants were subsequently interviewed. It was determined there were three couples who were anxious to be a part of the research project and available to begin a weekly Wednesday evening meeting. None of the couples knew each other before the meetings began. The following is a brief description of each participant.

Participant One (P1) is a 45-year-old male. He is a professional in the work place with an engineering degree. He comes from a Catholic background, but has

⁷ The entire survey, including the selected participant's responses, is attached as Appendix 1.

⁸ Because this was going to be a process that encompassed at least two years, it was deemed important it begin with people in whom there was reasonable confidence of completing the entire process.

been nominal in his faith for most of his life. His entry into faith was facilitated by meeting his future wife who came to Christ at WBCC in 1994.

Participant Two (P2) is the wife of P1. She is a 44-year-old female. She is a registered nurse with a degree in nursing sciences. She has a nominal Catholic background. She came to Christ at WBCC during the painful days leading up to the dissolution of her previous marriage. Though a regular attender, she had never taken steps to grow in her faith until she met her current husband. They determined together to build a Christ-centered home.

Participant Three (P3) is a 42-year-old male. He holds a B.S. in Marine Science. He is a professional in the work place and a former United States Army Captain. He has attended WBCC for more than 17 years, but until recently had never made a personal commitment to Christ. He grew up at the knee of a German mother who professed atheism. His wife, a long-term, devoted Christian patiently prayed for years for him to come to know Christ in a personal way.

Participant Four (P4) is the wife of P3. She is 42-years-old. She holds a B.A. in Early Childhood Education and is the principal of a local Christian Primary School. She is longest-term Christian in the representative group having grown up in a devout Pentecostal home and having made her own profession of faith at a young age.

Participant Five (P5) is a 42-year-old male. He is a shipyard office worker and a trainer for apprentice shipbuilders. He was reared in a devout Catholic home, but admits his involvement in church had always been primarily to honor and please his parents. He was unchurched for many years before meeting his future wife in 2001. Once they decided to marry they started the process of seeking out a church where

they would both feel a part. His wife had visited WBCC numerous times in previous years. They decided to visit and committed their lives to Christ and to membership within a few weeks of coming.

Participant Six (P6) is a 43-year-old female and the wife of P5. She is a professional in the work place. She came to WBCC during the painful days leading up to the dissolution of her previous marriage. Circumstances led her away from the church for a couple of years. She returned when she and her new fiancé agreed to the need of having a church family at the foundation of their married life.

Together, these six individuals formed a strong representation of the typical WBCC member.

The Modality: Assessment, Affirmation and Goal Setting

The modality has three primary elements as defined in Chapter Three of this document. The following is a description of how these three elements were applied in this research.

The Assessment Process

It was theorized that the assessment tool would be most effective when some form of comparison could be utilized to demonstrated growth. For that reason, it was decided that each participant would complete two assessments, one year apart. These two assessments would be juxtaposed in an effort to reflect any growth realized. It was further theorized that a more accurate picture of current Christian maturity would

be possible after the participants had entered into a trust relationship with one another. For that reason the group committed to remain together for two years. The first assessment would take place at the conclusion of the first year. The second assessment would take place at the conclusion of the second year together.

It was theorized that the six members of the representative group would embrace the tool as an opportunity to evaluate their current maturity and create a meaningful process toward future growth toward fruitful maturity. Each participant acknowledged that the assessment instrument being used was prepared, based on personal experience in pastoral ministry and had not been subjected to rigorous academic evaluation. They agreed that, even given that reality, it would be meaningful to utilize the tool to assess their current maturity toward fruitful maturity in Christ. Their belief expressed was being that, though the assessment tool is in formative stages, it still lends itself to qualitative investigation. They also felt it an honor to be a part of the beginning stages of the assessment tool's journey toward academic credibility.

It is hoped that future academic research will provide that credibility and ultimate usefulness to the greater body of Christ.

The Affirmation Process

Convergent validity is the desired goal after the self-assessor sits down with a trusted Christian friend to discuss the conclusions reached during the self-testing phase of the assessment process. As described in Chapter Three of this document, self-tests are inherently subjective and therefore flawed.

In this research, all six participants agreed to sit down after each assessment and review their answers. They were not challenged on their conclusions per se. They were asked to give examples for each area they expressed activity and to explain their reasoning behind their conclusions. This control mechanism requires a high level of transparency and authenticity. Such honesty is only possible with someone who is highly trustworthy. This was one reason the initial assessment was only done after one year together as a group. Each participant agreed to sit down for the affirmation meeting. Each participant expressed a willingness to address issues with clarity and transparency. The goal was to provide a greater sense of confidence in the conclusions reached after the affirmation meeting than those reached after self-testing alone.

The Goal Setting Process

The final element in the modality is a facility for personal goal setting. It is theorized that without specific goals set along with a specific methodology for accomplishment of those goals, the assessment process would be personally interesting but ineffective in providing a means for growth.

Each participant was asked, following the affirmation meeting, to select two areas for growth in the year ahead. They were invited to consider the two lowest areas on their charts, but were not required to set goals in those areas. They were instructed to prayerfully consider what the Lord might be saying to them about areas of growth and to set goals accordingly. Once those areas were selected each

participant communicated them and was led to determine the what, why, how and when (as described in Chapter Three of this document) of each goal set.

At the end of the second year together, goals from the first year would be reviewed and successes and failures considered.

The Sodality: A Small Group Environment

Essential to an open process and honest evaluation is not only affirmation by an objective observer, but participant trust in that observer. A safe environment in which strengths and weaknesses can be identified is critical in these exploratory case studies. For the purposes of the WBCC process the above-described participants agreed to participate in a weekly home group. A range of activities was included in these weekly gatherings. These activities included worship, Bible study, discussions and even outside service projects. The overarching goal of the group was to build a genuine trust environment in which, not only could convergent validity be achieved, but was actually desired by each participant.

The small group began in the home of the researcher, considered safe territory for all, since all participants had been in the home previously. The first evening together was committed to sharing personal stories and faith histories with one another. The conversations began tentatively at first, but became increasingly transparent over time. Personal discovery as well as inter-personal development where paramount.

The specific curriculum utilized for this two year process was not included in the research. It was theorized that over the course of two years, a full range of topics might be considered. It was further theorized that as long as the materials covered were biblically sound and relevant to the participant's lives, spiritual formation would take place. In other words, a wide range of possible studies could have been used and the same result might well have been reached. During the two year research period group participants agreed to maintain daily personal devotional times. They brought any questions that arose during the week to the group for researching biblically. Between the studies, the personal devotional experiences shared and honest questions received and answered in a safe and secure environment, a deep sense of authenticity and trust formed among all of the members of the group.

Implementing the Process

After twelve months of meeting weekly members of the representative group were asked complete the Christian Maturity Assessment Tool.⁹ They agreed to do so. They were also asked to voluntarily meet with this researcher in a private interview for the evaluation and affirmation of their responses. The goal of the affirmation meeting was to reach convergent validity in the conclusions reached through the use of the tool and to direct the participant toward goals that would facilitate genuine spiritual formation.

⁹ Attached as Appendix 2.

The results of those affirmation meetings are considered to have produced a reasonably accurate picture of each participant's current Christian maturity. They also produced a set of personal goals toward Christian maturity, for each participant. This was the first step in the process to attempt to measure the impact of the feedback and to speculate about the change progression anticipated.

The group continued to meet for another year. At the conclusion of the second year, a second round of assessments were held. This second round of interviews produced a second set of data for each participant. This data was then compared with the previous year's results, both as it related to each of the thirteen categories described above and the overall level of maturity. The comparison of those data points indicated each respondent's growth, or lack of growth, during the year between the two assessments. That data is presented in Chapter Five of this document.

Additional qualitative data was gathered and assessed as it relates to the efficacy of the modality and sodality as described above, in their personal spiritual formation toward maturity. This data was gathered by way of a focus group discussion among the six participants. Participants were provided the initial questions in advance for reflection and consideration.¹⁰ The initial questions were,

1) In what ways did your being a part of this small group affect you?

What ideas do you have for improving the small group experience?

2) In what ways did completing the Christian Maturity Assessment

Tool impact you? What ideas do you have for improving the assessment experience?

¹⁰ These questions were developed in consultation with Dr. Amy Dominquez, Director of Programming, Regent University School of Psychology.

3) In what ways did completing the Affirmation Meetings affect you?

What ideas do you have for improving the affirmation meeting experience?

4) In what ways did the goal setting process affect you? What ideas do you have for improving the goal setting process?

5) How did the concept of stages of growth; i.e. infant, adolescent, adult and parent, affect your growth?

6) Is there anything you would like to add about your experience with the small group, assessment tool or goal setting process?

Additional data was captured from the responses and interactions that grew out of the group discussion. A transcript of the discussion is attached as Appendix 3.

Minimizing Distortion

The classic query in any discussion of the interview process for gathering qualitative data is articulated by Dean and Whyte; i.e. “How do I know if the informant is telling the truth?”¹¹

Those who ask the question seem bothered by the insight that people sometimes say things for public consumption that they would not say in private. And sometimes they behave in ways that seem to contradict or cast serious doubt on what they profess in open conversation. So the problem arises: Can you tell what a person really believes on the basis of a few questions put to him in an interview? Is this not a legitimate question? The answer is, “No”—not as stated. It assumes that there is invariably some basic underlying attitude or opinion that a person is firmly committed to, i.e. his real belief. And it implies that if we can just develop shrewd enough interviewing

¹¹ Lewis Anthony Dexter, *Elite and Specialize Interviewing* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 119.

techniques, we can make him “spill the beans” and reveal what this basic attitude really is.¹²

The approach that there is one truth that must be gleaned from effective interviewing technique negates the very power of qualitative data. It is qualitative, specifically because it is a subjective snap shot of what each respondent believes to be his views at a given time. The data derived from a qualitative interview can, when analyzed later, be as enlightening to the respondent as to the interviewer.

Dean and Whyte conclude,

We should emphasize that the interviewer is not looking for the true attitude or sentiment. He should recognize that informants can and do hold conflicting sentiments at one time and they hold varying sentiments according to the situations in which they find themselves. The interview itself is a social situation, so the researcher must also consider how this situation may influence the expression of sentiments and the reporting of events. With such considerations in mind, the researcher will not ask himself, “How do I know if the informant is telling the truth?” Instead, the researcher will ask, “What do the informants’ statements reveal about his feelings and perceptions and what inferences can be made from them about the actual environment or events he has experienced.”¹³

Given that understanding, there are methodologies available to the interviewer helpful in recognizing distortion. It is particularly helpful to the participant for the affirmation partner to be aware of these potential dynamics during the affirmation meeting. When questions call for subjective data, interviewers must be aware of potential ulterior motives, barriers to candor and a respondent’s desire to please the interviewer.¹⁴ When objective data is being gathered the primary check employed

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 131.

¹⁴ Ibid., 121.

relates to the plausibility of the responses given. In a cold interview process, this is profoundly difficult to determine, short of validating the information through additional witnesses.

In the context of this research project there were several potential bias points. In each case, this interviewer is the respondent's pastor, and for most of the respondents, the pastor who shared the Gospel message at the point they came to faith in Christ. It was therefore assumed that answers to all questions would be biased toward seeking the approval of the interviewer.

Answers given in a self-assessment of Christian maturity are impacted by the current level of maturity of each respondent. Typically, the less mature the respondent is the more defensiveness he will exhibit. The more mature the respondent is, the more humility he will exhibit. It is almost counterintuitive to say, but nevertheless accurate, that the higher the score arrived, often the lower the actual maturity level. Therefore, subsequent years of assessment will sometimes produce a lower score overall, while simultaneously demonstrating growth in selected areas of Christian belief and behavior.

For this research project, several checks were put into place to mitigate those potential biases. First, each respondent was assured of anonymity. Some profile information is given, but because it is a median profile for the entire congregation it could apply to hundreds of congregants. This minimizes the "audience" they felt compelled to impress. The effort to mitigate any potential desire to impress the interviewer took more concerted effort.

The above-described participants invested hundreds of hours together building a trust relationship where honesty was valued over good appearance. Week after week the discussion sessions included expressions like, “How far you’ve come in your spiritual journey is not nearly as important as knowing where you are and where you want to go.” This environment created a perceived value of obtaining an honest assessment as a critical part of the maturation process.

The interview processes and focus group gatherings were done in the actual host homes where the weekly social and worship gatherings took place. This physical positioning was designed to remind each respondent, as well as the interviewer, of the safe environment they all worked to create and value. This facilitated Dexter’s position that, “The interview situation must be seen as just one of many situations in which an informant may reveal subjective data in different ways.”¹⁵ The goal of these gatherings was to create an atmosphere in which this was just another typical gathering of the small group.

The data was collected through these case studies and analyzed using a frequency and consistency approach to establish patterns and explore validity possibilities. The author looked for statistical generalizations, which are determined by the frequency of a specific response or the frequency of a specific pattern. According to Yin, “If patterns coincide, the results can help a case study to strengthen its internal validity... as long as the predicted pattern of specific variables is defined prior to data collection.”¹⁶ The predictable pattern is that the process developed will

¹⁵ Ibid., 122.

¹⁶ Yin, 116.

in fact reflect a consistent indication of the process from conversion to fruitful maturity.

The Goal of the Research

The project is designed to explore the growth of six participants from conversion to fruitful spiritual maturity. This process therefore includes an initial personal assessment, a discussion around the conclusions reached and a growth plan. After one year, the process was repeated to ascertain the spiritual growth of the individual and the results provide the data for these case studies. Once this process was completed a general discussion was held, designed to ascertain the participant's level of confidence in the process and to glean constructive criticism for future improvement of the process.

All of the data gathered is presented and discussed in Chapter Five of this research document. The analysis of lessons deemed to have been learned from the data is presented in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER 5

THE RESEARCH DATA

This project pre-supposed that a thorough investigation of the sodality and modality in this research would yield additional insight into how the process from conversion to fruitful maturity works at WBCC. As such, the data represented was collected from the participants in this study through interviews, anecdotal information and direct observation. The overarching question that had to be answered was whether and how the participants grew toward maturity in Christ. If limited or absent growth was the case, the results would reflect this and the process may be deemed a failure and in need of complete re-evaluation. If significant spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity could be determined and examined, then the process may be deemed to have merit and therefore warrant investigation and potential validation. Chapter Six will evaluate the strengths, weaknesses and areas for future development of the process. This chapter is designed to present and evaluate the data gathered.

Did the participants experience spiritual formation toward fruitful Christian maturity, and if so, how? Did that growth take place along the *being/connect*, *becoming/grow*, *doing/serve* growth trajectory? From the evidence collected, the answer is a definitive, yes. There is evidence from the data collected and conversations held of significant growth in all six participants. Each participant concluded his/her interview sessions with a personal assessment of the individual's spiritual life and a commitment to growth. Participant One concluded, "[This process] literally took me from living life in the dark, to living in the light. It was absolutely

profound for me. It was not just helping me to open up more with people, but studying the Word together, realizing and exchanging the dialogue about the void that I had in my life and that some of you may have had in your own. Sharing that experience and not being ashamed to express that, turned the light bulb on for me.” Participant Five said, “I’d like to say, a lot like Participant One, I was very immature as a Christian coming into this small group setting, not knowing what to expect—what it was going to be like. If you’ll recall, there was one group night it was like the light bulb came [and] my relationship with Christ grew.” Each participant concluded growth toward maturity in Christ had taken place over the two years of the research period.

This chapter is subdivided into three sections. Section One presents a comparison of the respondent’s affirmed assessment results at the end of the first year juxtaposed with their respective results at the end of the second year. A chart depicting that comparison follows each participant’s profile. The solid line represents the year one affirmation meeting results. The dashed line represents the year two affirmation meeting results. Section Two presents an analysis of the post-research discussion with the six participants under the guidelines described in Chapter Four of this document. Section Three is an outcome summary of the data as presented.

Participant Data

Participant One—First Year Assessment

The first year affirmation meeting began with P1's personal subjective assessment of himself as an infant Christian. His first words upon sitting down and handing the assessment to this researcher were, "I think I scored too high." The participant's subjective assessment was personally accepted; but not discussed. It was decided to allow the affirmation meeting process to confirm or disprove the assertion.

The affirmation was warm and congenial with no apparent tension. Transparency and authenticity seemed to come easily to the interviewee. There was no apparent fear of unfair judgment. P1 expressed a genuine interest in the process and a desire to continue growing in his faith. After a brief exchange of personal pleasantries the conversation turned to the assessment tool used for this study. This affirmation meeting produced the most significant changes of all the participants in this round of affirmation meetings.

The participant was asked to explain his thought process in determining his answers. In some cases, he was asked to give examples that supported his conclusions. For instance, the participant responded with a "Almost always" to the statement, "I know what my spiritual gifts are." When asked how those gifts were determined he responded with, "I recently took the spiritual gifts profile and I know the conclusions it reached." When the theory that standardized tests were only an indicator, that the real determination of spiritual gifts came after a season of using

gifts in the body of Christ and finding both affirmation from other members of the body and fruit from his labors, he agreed the answer was more likely “rarely” since he had yet to become involved in any ministry endeavors at the church.

The most significant changes recognized during the interview related to ministering to others. This participant responded to statement 35, “I pray with other Christians to make Jesus Lord of their life” with “sometimes.” When asked for a recent example, he was unable to provide one. He acknowledged that he conversed with people along those lines but in fact, had never really prayed with anyone in that way. The more accurate answer was “Almost Never.”

The most significant struggle came with statement twelve, “I cultivate friendships with unbelievers in order to lead them to Christ.” The respondent recorded an “almost never” and suggested that his number would not likely increase in that area. The idea of cultivating a friendship with an evangelistic purpose had a ring of manipulation to him. Even after an extended dialogue, the respondent’s thoughts did not appear to have changed on this topic.

The meeting with P1 concluded, as congenially as it began, with prayer. The conclusion was reached that he was in the late infant stage of his Christian experience with an affirmed score of 80. He agreed that the affirmation conversation produced a much more accurate picture of his current Christian maturity than his personal assessment alone had produced.

P1 set goals in the areas of Biblical Worldview and Giving. His need in those two areas was already perceived by him. He expressed openly that a dearth of biblical knowledge was his greatest weakness. He also acknowledged that tithing was

a principle he had not incorporated into his worship at this stage of his walk with Christ.

Participant One—Second Year Assessment

The affirmation meeting with P1 at the end of year two was just as congenial as the first. A subjective observation was that P1 was even more relaxed having been through the process before and now having a sense of personal value attached to it.

The first observed contrast between the year one and year two affirmation meetings was the accuracy with which P1 assessed himself. In year one there was a striking difference between his personal initial scores and the affirmed scores; i.e. 120 and 80 respectively. In year two there was virtually no difference between his personal assessment and the affirmed assessment; i.e. 172 and 170 respectively. The most striking contrast is the score. P1 grew from an affirmed score of 80 (late infant) to that of 170 (early adult). This comparison is revealed in Figure 3 below.

The most disappointing aspect of the process was related to goal setting. In the year one interviews P1 set specific goals in the areas of biblical knowledge and giving, having scored 5 out of a possible 20 points in each area. In his year two affirmation meetings those scores had changed somewhat (11 and 8 respectively) but continued to be among the lowest scores on his graph.

When that observation was made, P1 acknowledged his need to increase his biblical knowledge. He was uncomfortable to discuss his giving practices.

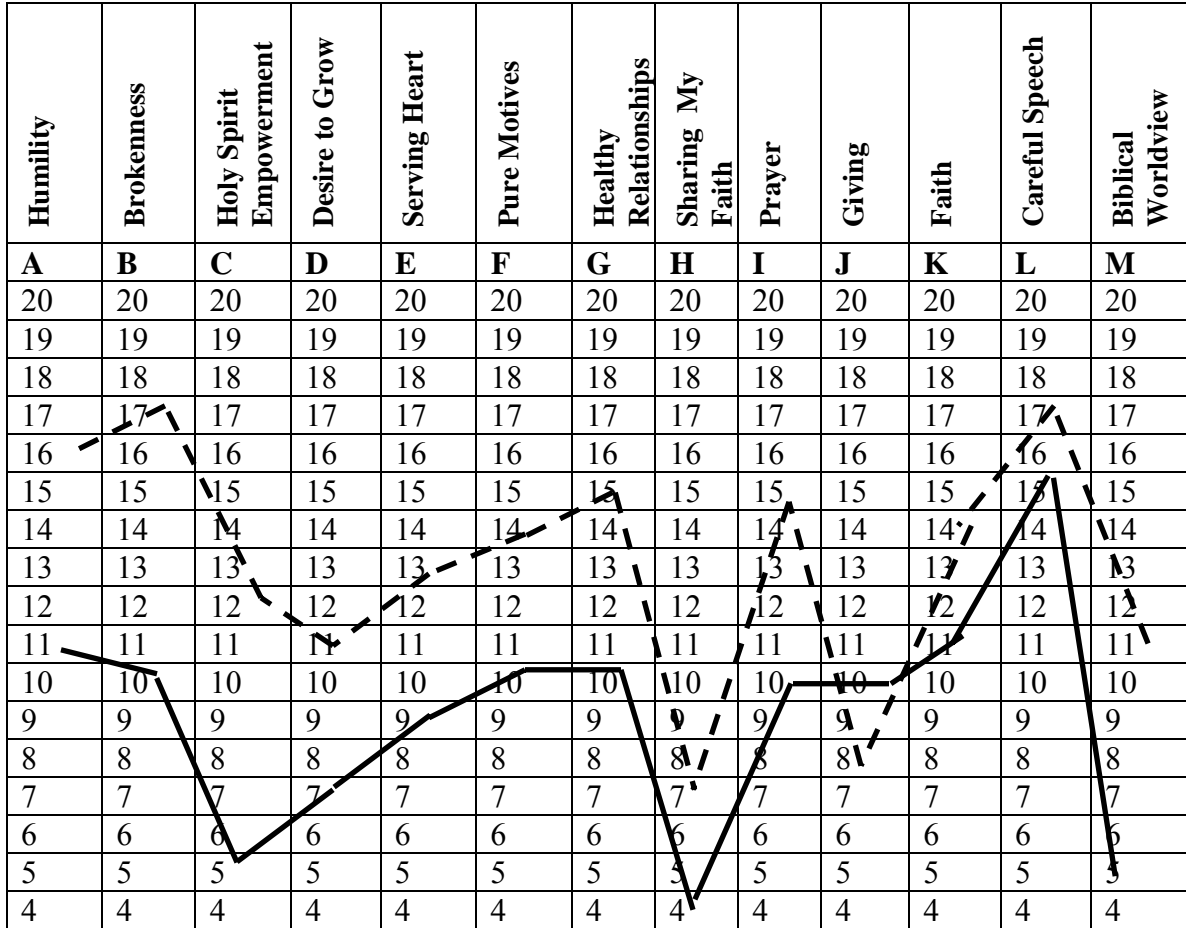
His most significant change surfaced in the area of sharing his faith. In the previous year P1 had been reluctant to embrace the goal of making friendships with

the express goal of sharing his faith. During the intervening year, a co-worker was diagnosed with a terminal illness. P1 became the designated person from among the Christians in the office to determine whether this co-worker was personally ready to face the judgment. It was ultimately determined that the co-worker had a personal faith in Christ, but in the process P1 realized his inadequacy in broaching the subject with a co-worker. This motivated him to set, as his primary goal for the new year, that of learning how to share his faith. His attitude toward making friends with unbelievers with of goal of sharing his faith had changed significantly.

In light of the *being/connect*, *becoming/grow* and *doing/serve* motif, P1 has demonstrated a genuine desire to know himself in light of the Savior. He has made significant strides toward becoming a fully-mature follower of Christ. He continues his journey toward discovering his spiritual gifts and corresponding niche in the body of Christ.

Perhaps the most profound growth area for this participant is in the area of Christian community. Before joining the small group, he confessed to coming to church with the intention of slipping in late and leaving immediately following the service. As a result of this time together his level of participation in the church has changed dramatically. His education and technical expertise have yet to be tapped for the Kingdom; however, he now serves as one of the primary greeters at the front door of the church on Sunday mornings. This in itself represents a profound life-change from that of an outside observer of religious things, to that of a full participant in Christian community. He now describes the relationships he has formed among the members of the group as “powerful” saying, “I get chills when I think about it.”

Figure 3. Participant One Growth Chart



Year One: Solid Line
Year Two: Dashed Line

Participant Two—First Year Assessment

The initial results of P2's personal assessment at the end of year one together suggested she was at the mid-adolescent stage of her spiritual formation toward maturity. She stated she was confused by the result.

Her confusion became apparent quickly in the affirmation meeting. She was willing to subjectively assess her maturity level as "late infant"; however, she found it embarrassing to admit objectively that she didn't have the experiences of an adult or

parent believer. Her conclusion, after discovering the disparity, was that she was a product of a guilt-based approach to faith. She concluded that she wanted an accurate assessment of her maturity level even though she felt guilty that she was not further along in her spiritual formation.

A perusal of her assessment did produce significant changes. When asked for specific examples relating to “teaching Biblical principles to others” and “praying with others to accept Christ” (both of which are deemed “parent level” activities) she acknowledged her responses could not be substantiated. As a result, we changed a significant number of her original answers. While it was difficult for her to do this honest process, once completed, she felt much more confident we had an accurate result. The drop in score from 126 to 110 was therefore affirming to her.

This participant set goals in the areas of giving, sharing her faith and finding her niche in the body of Christ.

Participant Two—Second Year Assessment

The year-two affirmation meetings revealed remarkable spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity as well as accuracy in her personal assessment when compared to the previous year (Figure 4). Her affirmed score represented a growth from early-adolescent stage a year before to mid-adult; i.e. 110 to 184. There was no significant adjustment between her personal score and the affirmed score during the year two affirmation meeting.

P2’s goals in year one related to finding her niche in the church, sharing her faith with unbelievers and giving. Year two revealed significant growth in several

areas. She only demonstrated significant growth in one of the three areas in which goals had been set. She expressed an increased proclivity to share her faith with fellow believers in various settings, but lacked confidence in her ability to share her faith with unbelievers.

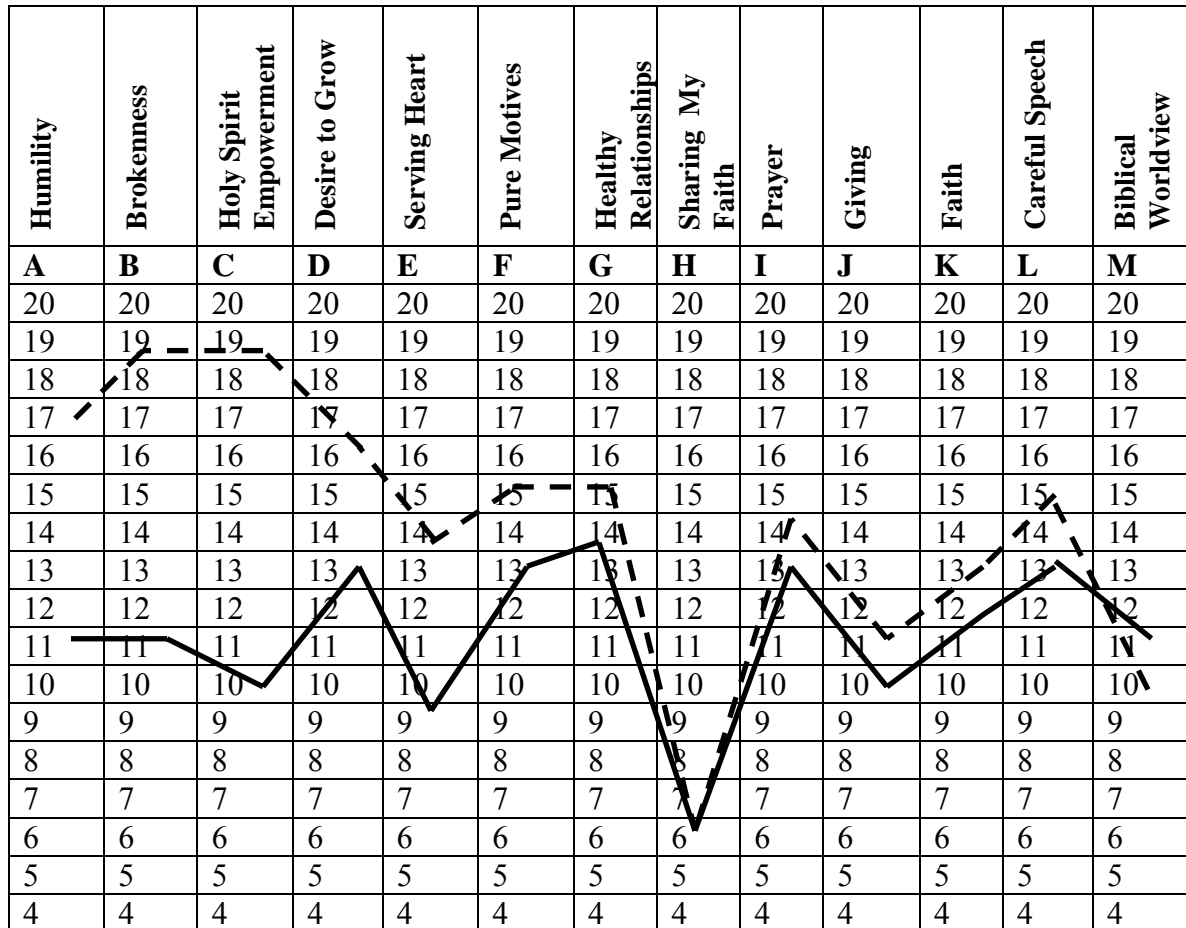
Little change was reflected in her giving patterns from the previous year. The one area where a goal was set and significant growth happened was in the area of service. Her excitement was apparent. She had accepted the role of leading the Medical Emergency Response Team at the church. As such, she was now responsible to lead a group of medical professionals who make themselves available on Sunday mornings for any medical emergencies that might arise. She expressed deep satisfaction in this area of service and was very pleased to be able to use her nursing skills and leadership gifts for the Lord. When asked about her significant growth in areas where no goals had been set, she remarked that God had been working on her heart all year. She had finally let go of the need to control her circumstances. She had learned that she couldn't control much of her life. She further learned that was OK because she could trust God to work in those circumstances.

Rather than establish new goals, P2 opted to carry over her goal to better prepare herself for sharing her faith with unbelievers. Her specific commitment was to attend the "How to Share Your Faith" seminar through the Community Bible Institute at her first opportunity.

In light of the *being/connect*, *becoming/grow* and *doing/serve* motif P2 has shown marked growth in all three dynamics. She has come from a hurting soul unsure of her relationship with Christ, to a leader in the Kingdom serving others as

she is being served. Her nursing skills are proving to be a great asset to the church. It is fully expected that, as she continues to focus on the becoming motif through continued interaction with fellow believers and formal studies in the Scriptures, her influence in the Kingdom will continue to grow.

Figure 4. Participant Two Growth Chart



Year One: Solid Line
Year Two: Dashed Line

Participant Three—First Year Assessment

P3 was the one participant in the group whose year one personal assessment score was lower than his affirmed score; i.e. 114 and 159 respectively.

The most significant differences between the participant's original score and that reached after the affirmation meeting were related to the participant's acknowledged tendency to be very hard on himself.

In response to the statement, "I share my faith with the unbelievers I know" P3 scored himself with a "2" (Rarely). When asked whether coworkers, saved and unsaved, were aware of his faith in Christ, he told stories of almost weekly encounters at work. When it was suggested that his experience sounded far more "often" than "rare," he reluctantly agreed. His reluctance was due to the fact that his lifestyle has long been that of a moral and upright person. Many in his workplace assumed him to be a Christian before he ever came to Christ. Since coming to Christ, he readily acknowledges and shares his faith in the workplace; however, many co-workers are unaware of the dramatic change in his heart.

In response to the question, "I have a consistent quiet time" P3 scored himself with a "3" (Sometimes). After asking him to describe his quiet times with the Lord, it was apparent that he had a very consistent quality time with God every day. In his understanding, his answer could not be a "5" (Almost Always) unless that time was during the same block of time every day. When pressed to recognize daily intimate time with God as consistent, even if it took place at different times of the day, he reluctantly agreed.

By the conclusion of the affirmation meeting this participant had begun to view his walk with God with more confidence than he had before. The goals set by this participant related primarily to his lack of formal biblical training. He acknowledged his influence in the body of Christ. He recognized a call to leadership

in the body. He expressed a commitment to preparing himself for that role. He specifically committed to read through the Bible in the coming year and to take several Bible courses through WBCC's Community Bible Institute.

Participant Three—Second Year Assessment

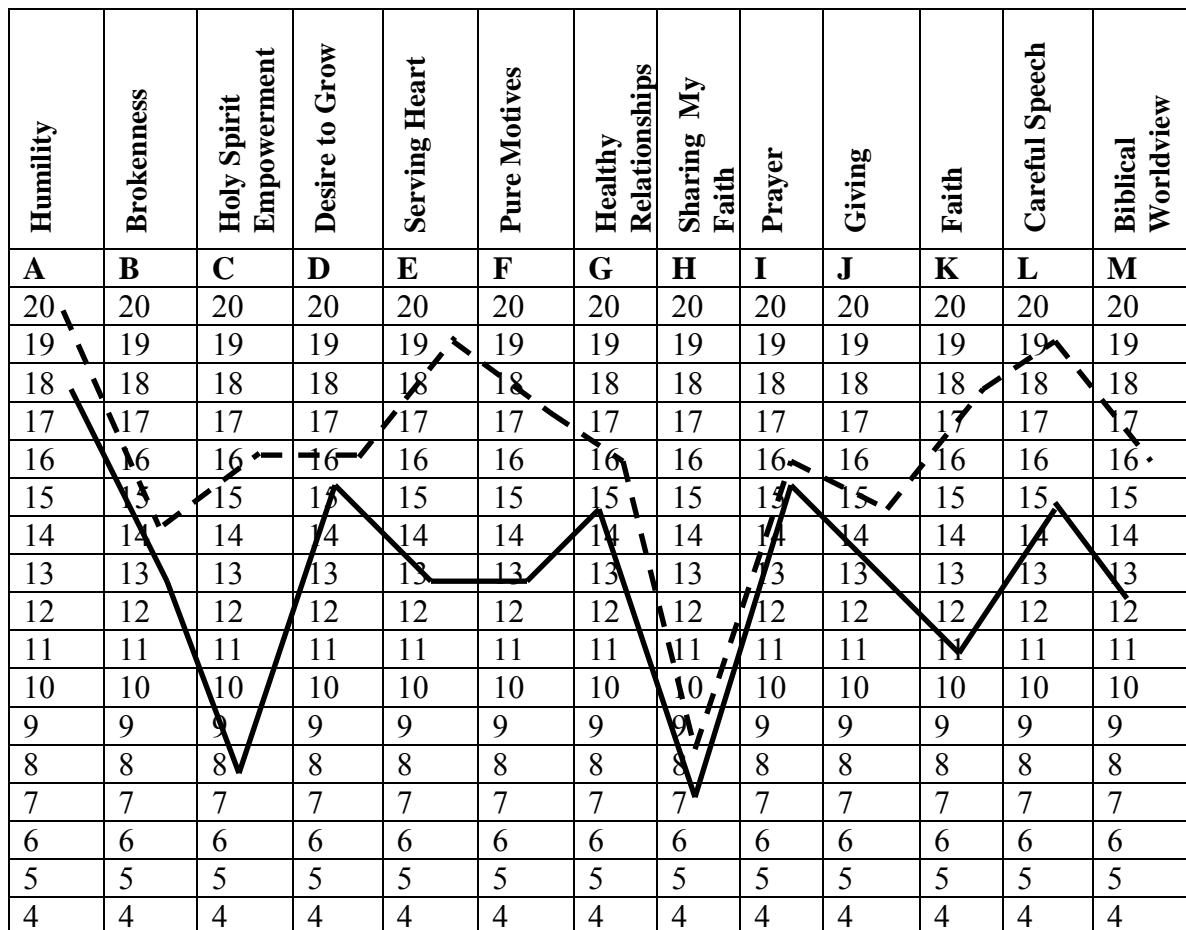
The year-two affirmation meeting yielded no changes from the personal assessment done by P3. This participant continues to be introspective and highly motivated to spiritual formation toward maturity. He is more objective in his assessment of his maturity than one year ago.

The chart below (Figure 5) reveals growth in every area, the most significant being in areas of Holy Spirit Empowerment, Serving Heart and Faith. When asked about his growth in those areas P3 expressed an awareness of something in his spirit having been awakened during the year. "It was like a light came on," he said. He expressed some continuing discomfort with expressing emotion in a public setting, but recognized a significant change in that area as well. He used the well-worn expression, "This has changed my life." That phrase is certainly apropos in this context.

In light of the *being/connect*, *becoming/grow* and *doing/serve* motif, this participant has made the biggest strides of all those in the representative group. His growth scores have gone from a personal assessment of 110 in the first year to an affirmed assessment of 210 in the second year. He has also accepted leadership of the small group that continues to function as a family unit in the church as well as leadership of the parking team for the Sunday celebration services.

This year's goals include a continued commitment to read through the Bible, attending Community Bible Institute courses and building relationships with his unbelieving neighbors with a goal of sharing his faith.

Figure 5. Participant Three Growth Chart



Year One: Solid Line

Year Two: Dashed Line

Participant Four—First Year Assessment

P4 was the one member of the representative group with a long-term relationship with Christ that pre-dated coming to WBCC. The previously described survey, designed to create a profile of the average WBCC congregant, revealed that

approximately 40% of the church's members were Christ-followers before coming to the church. While a similar percentage would be difficult to duplicate in the representative group and still create a cross-section of maturity levels, there should be some representation of that profile. P4 is married to P3. She became the perfect candidate for the role.

P4's personal assessment in the year one interview was well thought out and proved to be authentic in most areas. Prior to the assessment P4 was confident of her "Parent" level of maturity. The assessment and subsequent affirmation meeting produced a significant revelation in two specific areas; i.e. giving and evangelism. P4's affirmed result was that of an adult believer.

In the area of giving, P4 acknowledged a carelessness in the area of tithing. She confessed a rationalization that because her husband had only recently become a Christ-follower, she was unable to tithe. In the area of evangelism, she offered that all of her time was spent doing life among and ministering to Christians. As a result, she had not shared her faith with an unbeliever in many years. She struggled to think of any unsaved people in her sphere of influence.

The goal setting dialogue produced specific goals in both of areas. She and her newly converted husband have committed to become tithers. She also committed to establish an intentional relationship with her daughter's child care provider with a goal of sharing her faith from a friendship evangelism perspective.¹

¹ Within six weeks of this affirmation interview P4 brought her child care provider's daughter and granddaughter to church. The following Sunday the daughter returned and committed her life to Christ. That new convert is now being sponsored by the original small group toward membership.

Participant Four—Second Year Assessment

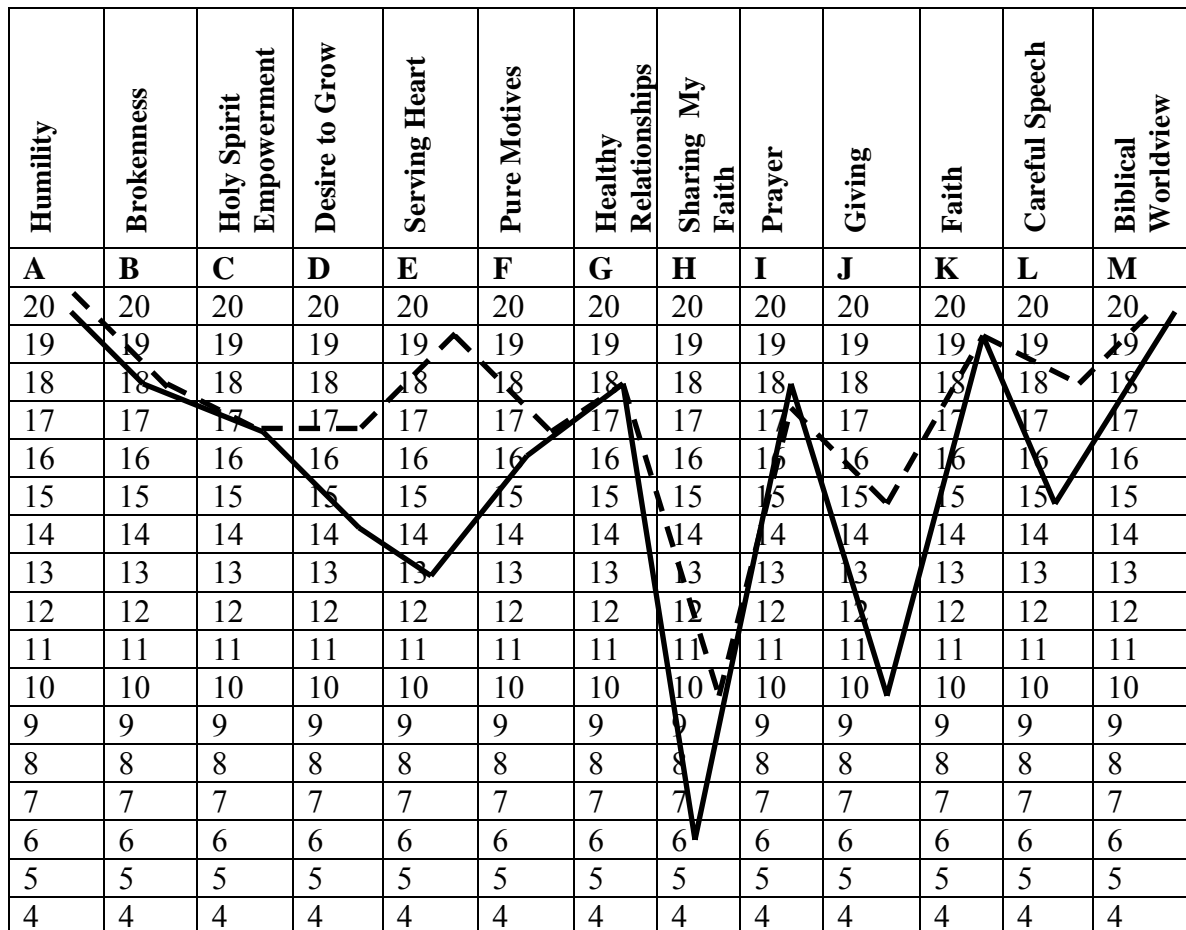
The year-two affirmation meeting with P4 was even warmer than the previous year. This participant had been through a relationally difficult experience in the work place. This participant has worked in the same Christian organization for many years. One result was that of long term relationships with Christians that served her personally, but actually served as an inhibitor to building healthy community in the church. The difficult experience served to solidify her relationships at church as her primary forum for support and counsel.

P4's affirmation meeting reveals growth in most areas but most remarkably in the areas of giving and serving in the local church. The previous year's assessment had resulted in a goal of sharing her faith with an unbeliever, who within a few weeks committed her life to Christ. Yet, P4 did not demonstrate continued growth in that area. Therefore her primary goal for the coming year is to build relationships with her unsaved neighbors with a goal of sharing her faith with them.

In light of the *being/connect*, *becoming/grow* and *doing/serve* dynamic P4 demonstrated growth in every area. Her connection to Christ was well established before this process began. Her connection to her local church has changed dramatically. Her commitment to grow toward maturity had weakened in recent years, believing she had achieved a high level of Christian maturity. Her comment was, "This process has created intentionality in my commitment to grow as a Christian. I needed that." As for the *doing/serve* dynamic, P4 has moved from a consistent attender to a co-leader of a small group and regular worker in the kids'

ministries. This is reflected in her significant growth in the “Serving Heart” category of the assessment.

Figure 6. Participant Four Growth Chart



Year One: Solid Line

Year Two: Dashed Line

Participant Five—First Year Assessment

P5 was very tender during his year-one affirmation meeting. His discovery of spiritual things had touched his emotions at a level that he had never experienced before. He expressed deep gratitude for what the Lord was doing in his life and that of his family. His hunger to go deeper in his walk with God was apparent to all who

spent time with him. He spoke of people in the work place who were beginning to recognize his faith and come to him for fellowship and even Christian counsel. He was elated.

The affirmation meeting did not produce significant changes in his score. There were a few areas where the participant was overly modest in his response. For the most part he was very aware of his areas of strength and needed areas of growth.

P5's results were 106 (early adolescent) and the affirmed score was 112 (mid-adolescent). There were no changes in his primary target areas for growth.

P5 set goals in the areas of gaining biblical knowledge, sharing his faith with unbelievers and finding his niche in the body of Christ. He acknowledged his leadership gifts but expressed a lack of confidence in his readiness to step into a leadership role at that time. He predicted he would accept the mantle of leadership in due time. The year-one affirmation meeting enhanced the confidence that P5 will be an effective leader in the kingdom of God as his confidence and biblical knowledge grows.

Participant Five—Second Year Assessment

The year-two affirmation meeting with P5 demonstrated significant spiritual formation toward maturity. His results were similar to previous participants in that his affirmation meeting produced fewer changes in his personal assessment than in the previous year. His results also revealed striking growth from a previous score of 112 (mid-adolescent) to 196 (late adult). The year-one affirmation meeting concluded with the agreement that this participant had significant potential to move into a

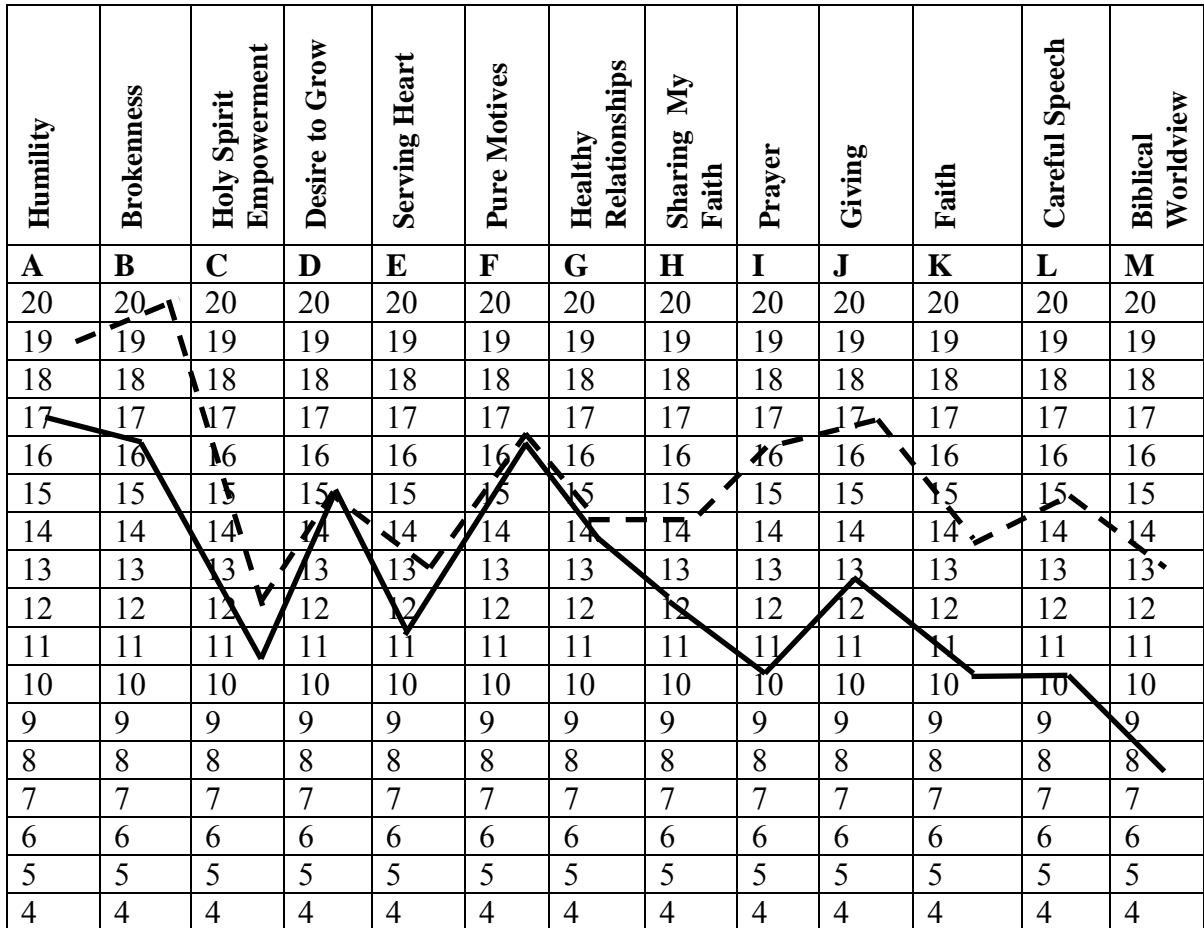
leadership role in the church. Since that time P5 has completed the course designed for training small group leaders and accepted the role of intern leader in his small group.

The chart below (Figure 7) does not reveal stand-out growth in any single category. It demonstrates consistent, incremental growth in virtually all areas. A perusal of the chart does reveal greater growth in the areas P5 designated as growth goals than in the areas he did not designate. His year-one scores in the areas of Holy Spirit Empowerment, Desire to Grow, a Serving Heart, Pure Motives and Healthy Relationships were already in the upper percentiles. His goals reflected a desire to grow mostly in the areas where he scored lowest. His commitment paid off as revealed on the chart.

His goals for the new year relate to his desire to continue to grow in his biblical worldview. He set a specific goal to complete the 100 Level courses through the church's Community Bible Institute. His overarching goal is to better prepare himself, in biblical knowledge, for his future leadership role.

In light of the *being/connect*, *becoming/grow* and *doing/serve* motif, P5 has demonstrated significant formation toward fruitful maturity. His connection to Christ and His body is secure. His growth toward maturity has been consistent. His role in the kingdom has not been fully realized, but a vision of the future that includes a leadership role continues to motivate him to grow.

Figure 7. Participant Five Growth Chart



Year One: Solid Line
Year Two: Dashed Line

Participant Six—First Year Assessment

The first affirmation meeting with P6 produced very few changes in the total score or in specific areas in which to grow. This participant's primary gifts are administrative and helping behind the scenes. She has been a great asset to the life of the representative group serving as the group's administrative coordinator.

The results of the year-one affirmation meeting moved her score slightly from 103 to 109 (early adolescent). The areas in which to focus for future growth did not

change from her personal assessment. P6 set specific goals in the areas of improving her prayer life and finding a specific area of service in the church where she could use her gifts.

Participant Six—Second Year Assessment

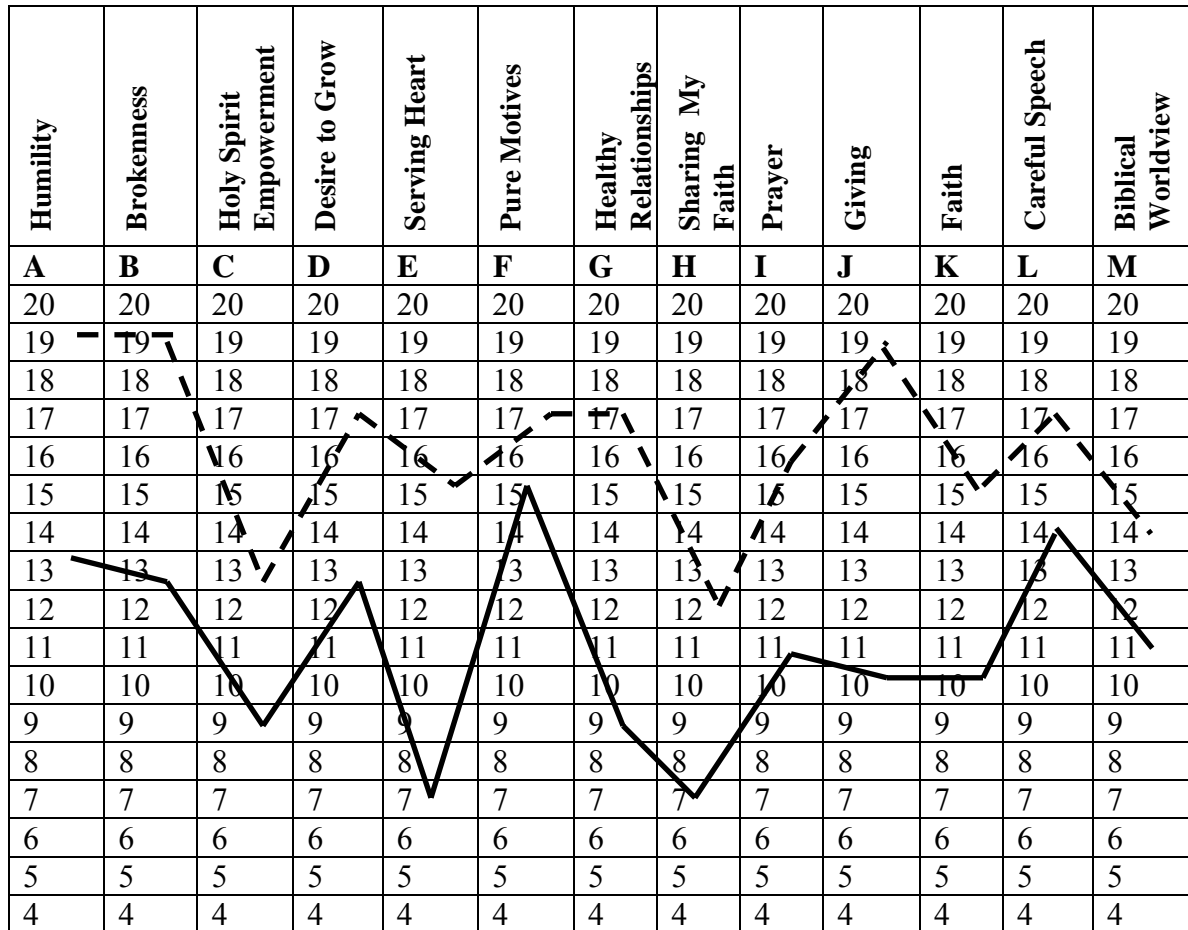
The year-two affirmation meeting with P6 was very congenial. This participant is sincere and gifted. She struggles with self-esteem having come through a difficult marriage. Her honesty and transparency in the group setting serves as a role model for all of the group members. Her growth toward Christian maturity has been dramatic having grown significantly in all thirteen of the stated categories, the most significant growth having come in the categories of “Serving Hearts” and “Giving.” She explained the growth in “Serving Hearts” was primarily due to her commitment to serve in two areas of the church. She serves as administrator of the small group and as a technician in the control booth on Sunday mornings. Both of these roles line up with her primary gifts and serve to provide fulfillment and satisfaction for her.

Equally dramatic was her growth in giving, having made the commitment to tithe consistently. P6 set specific goals to continue growing in the area of “Biblical Worldview” primarily through continued discussion on a small group level and by completing the 100 Level courses offered through the Community Bible Institute.

In light of the *being/connect*, *becoming/grow* and *doing/serve* motif P6 has demonstrated significant accomplishment. Her connection to Christ and His body is

well established and shared. Her growth toward maturity is deeply desired. Her service in the Kingdom is gifted and recognized by her fellow Christians.

Figure 8. Participant Six Growth Chart



Year One: Solid Line
Year Two: Dashed Line

The Data Summary

The above figures seem to suggest that there is significant growth in all three of the being, becoming and doing dynamics for all six participants.

According to the data, growth in *being/connect* is demonstrated through each participant's more accurate personal assessment in the second year than in the first. It seems as if the measurement tool used helped each individual to better assess himself/herself in the process of spiritual growth. Each was clearly more aware of who they were in Christ. They valued honesty and transparency in the year-one assessment and affirmation process. They strived for more transparency and accuracy in the year-two interview. This is equally demonstrated in their deep commitments to community with one another. Before this process began, none of them had any deep personal relationships in the church. The depth of this commitment is qualified in the post-small group debrief below. Therefore, in the assessment of spiritual growth in a church, honesty, transparency and commitment are important in both the process and should be included in the items of measurement or assessment.

Growth in *becoming/growing* is demonstrated by the data in each respondent's marked growth in virtually every area under consideration in this assessment. Every participant demonstrated at least stability and most often significant growth in each of the areas. In four of the six participants, this growth was in the specific areas where goals had been set the preceding year. Goal setting therefore is an important aspect of spiritual growth and should be included in any measurement used for spiritual growth.

The data confirms that growth in *doing/serving* is demonstrated in each respondent's commitment to and activity in a specific area of service in the church. None of the six participants had a specific area of service involvement in the church when this process began. At the conclusion all six could point to at least one,

ongoing area of service. Three of the six participants have accepted a significant leadership role in the church. A fourth has accepted the mantle of leadership and is training toward the fulfillment of that mantle. Involvement in the life of the community of faith through the church is a key aspect of spiritual growth. Measurement of growth should include service as a key element.

A Post-Research Discussion

In addition to the data demonstrating significant spiritual formation toward maturity in each participant, data was also gathered as it relates to the overall process. The six participants met as described in Chapter Four of this document.

As defined in Chapter Four the discussion took place in the home of one of the participants. Every effort was made to re-construct the atmosphere enjoyed in their typical small group gatherings. The first 90 minutes together was invested in food and fellowship which had nothing to do with the topic at hand. It would better be described as close friends spending an evening together. Discussions centered on new cars purchased, homes remodeled, children's current activities and life in general. It seems important that in engaging individuals in a discourse on spiritual growth, that a relaxed atmosphere should be created so that they can be more open and unrestrained in the dialogue.

Even after the more formal discussion began the atmosphere was warm and even festive. Nearly every comment made was punctuated with unanimous nods in the affirmative and congenial laughter. The discussion often broke down into general

chatter that ranged from good-natured teasing to the telling of similar stories triggered by the current question or comment.

The following is an overview of the discussion from a *being/connect*, *becoming/grow* and *doing/serve* perspective. These three dynamics were not explicitly discussed. The conversation centered around each participants' experience with the prescribed sodality and modality in respect to their spiritual formation toward fruitful Christian maturity. The trajectory is nevertheless clear from the dialogue. A complete transcript is attached as Appendix 3

Being/Connect

The three couples that made up the representative group met for the first time the night they started in the small group. There was a great deal of anxiety in the room from most of the participants around whether they were compatible in terms of their level of maturity in Christ as well as interpersonal affinity. The quintessential expression of that mood was captured by P2 when she said,

When we first started together we were unsure of the process. We didn't really know one another. We had no idea of who one another was, and then we just, I don't know, every time we met, we just started warming up and opening up and it just evolved into this community, this group that, I never had experienced anything like that before. It all happened so easily, we all just blended so nicely.

The depth of relationship that formed was not just out of common cultural affinity. It was centered in a desire to help one another grow to full maturity in Christ. P3 said it best,

You form relationships with people in your life through various ways; through work, through neighborhoods and things like that, but we came together through our church, from all different walks of life, and

formed close relationships unlike any other, at least for me, unlike any other that I have in any area of my life. I found myself...[sic] really becoming close in ways that you don't become close with people you work with, or live in your neighborhood with...[sic] it's more of a spiritual bond.

The discussion at the first group gathering centered around describing one another's current relationship with Christ. It was clear by the end that everyone was aware of their need to grow toward full maturity and that everyone had a deep desire to do so. It was equally clear that three of the participants believed themselves to have established a personal relationship with Christ, while three of them talked about knowing God better, but were not ready to confess a personal saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Being in relationship with the small group, centered in conversation about Christ and His Word, became the central topic of the small group from the outset. In time, each participant defined their *being* in terms of who they were in relationship to Christ. That relationship, along with their relationship with the body of Christ, became life changing. Spiritual excitement charged the atmosphere the night the final participant spoke, during a group prayer time, "I know that I am saved." It was an electric moment for everyone in the group. That journey to personal faith was still very much on the participants minds as they gathered for the post-research discussion.

When asked whether being in the small had impacted their lives, P3 said, "...these relationships, literally took me from living life in the dark, to living in the light. So, it was absolutely profound for me." P2 echoed, "I think that's true. I remember that first night I was sitting there thinking, 'All these people are strong Christians. I am so far over my head. Then I thought, 'Wait a minute, everyone has

their little piece of them that doubts, or is unsure, or has a different walk.’ I can tell you, if we didn’t do the group we would have been stuck, going to church on Sunday, walking away and going on. It changed our lives tremendously. We would have never advanced to this point at all.” Relationships with other members of the church body seems to be crucial in the spiritual growth of an individual at WBCC.

Becoming/Growing

Perhaps second in importance in each participant’s spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity was the assessment process. Participants spoke of the assessment as creating awareness. “You know what you are doing and not doing.” They spoke about intentionality. “I’m a Christian, but what does that mean? It brought a lot of focus to my life as a Christian. I would find myself thinking, I need to work on this and this. OK, what am I going to do?”

The consensus was also that the dynamic of the assessment within the context of the small group was critical. P3 opined, “The assessment tool can go into a church, but without the small group, its effectiveness could be somewhat limited.” P2 agreed, “We’re not all strong in a given area, so in a small group we can help each other. I have my weaknesses, you have yours. I have strengths in one area, you have strengths in another.” P5 suggested that doing the affirmation meeting together and meeting every few months to hold each other accountable could be an important way to keep each on track toward spiritual growth. P4 agreed suggesting there be something added to the small group lesson plans on a regular bases to remind everyone to check on their respective progress.

P5 offered that it was in the group setting that his proverbial “light came on.” He described the night in group with vivid detail that people in his work place were beginning to recognize him as a Christian. The change had been sufficiently subtle that he hadn’t made a big deal out of it, but he was thrilled that co-workers were not only noticing, but beginning to come to him for spiritual advice and counsel. He concluded saying, “I don’t if ya’ll remember that, but that was an early experience that was profound for me. The small group really has been profound for me.”

The affirmation meeting was equally important to the participants. P1 remembered his first affirmation meeting and reminisced that he had little confidence in his result until after we reviewed his answers together. The affirmation meeting did move the final score lower, but he felt more certain of the accuracy of the assessment and therefore in the value of goals he set. P3 said, “It’s like we become partners in the process.” P2 described the affirmation process as going both ways. Her experience had been occasions when her affirmation partner reminded her of times she did things she’d forgotten about, thus raising the result. Other times, the challenge to justify a response required the respondent to think more carefully before answering.

P1 added an important element as being the “trust factor.” He said, “There’s got to be a high level of trust. I had to know there was a high degree of confidentiality for me to be candid and ‘spill my guts.’”

Goal setting and accomplishment was deemed the weakest area of the process for most of the participants. A review of the goals set by the participants does reveal significant growth. The six participants set a total of thirteen measurable goals and

accomplished nine of them in an one year period. When told that was the case, the participants were encouraged but still felt a need to be more intentional about the fulfillment of goals in future assessments. Some felt a personal sense of failure saying, “I set goals and failed at them.” P2 described the goal setting and fulfillment process as providing a profound sense of satisfaction after a season of frustration. She had set a goal to attend the “How to Find Your Niche” seminar at the church and subsequently did just that. She expressed, “I always felt I needed to find something I could do in the church. Everyone [in the small group] was starting to find their place—you became a group leader and you joined the presentation team. I always felt like I needed to be more involved. Then the Emergency Medical Response Team came up and I was so excited.” P2 has since accepted the responsibility to lead that team. Finding her niche based in her gifts and natural affinities has had significant impact on her sense of accomplishment in her faith.

Participants expressed that the infant, adolescent, adult, parent growth trajectory created a sense of motivation to grow. P4 offered, “If you are even on the scale that’s a good thing because you have a relationship with Christ.” The room filled with laughter. She went on to posture the importance of doing a check up much like one might go to a medical doctor to evaluate physical health and then define a treatment plan according to need.

When the group was asked whether they were moving through the stages of maturity they exclaimed in unison, “Yes!” P1 said, “Oh my goodness. Yes, the numbers are increasing!” P6 emoted, “I thought it was scary. I thought I was an infant or less. What was the lowest, embryo?” She went on to talk about the change

she's experienced from how she used to think, what she used to value and how her entire worldview has changed. She confessed the change had come to the point that she struggled with the tension between her desire to build relationships with unbelievers with a goal to share her faith and her sense of disconnect with people who don't live within the confines of a biblical worldview.

The process was developed by this author as an initial exploration to see how an effective process works. From the responses of the participants and personal observation, it seems as if this process is worthy of further examination and testing.

Doing/Serve

Finding a place of service in the body of Christ is valued by the group; however, *doing/serve* was the area least specifically addressed in the discussion. P3 believed that not only were the numbers representing his overall maturity increasing, but his acceptance of responsibility in the church was increasing proportionately. P2 described her service role in the church as providing her with a deep sense of ownership and personal fulfillment. In describing serving a hurting person one Sunday morning she said, "I felt like I was finally doing something."

Very few other explicit comments were made; but, marked growth has taken place for each participant. None of the six participants had a specific area of service in the church before the research period began. By the conclusion all six had specific and consistent service roles: P1 serves with the Welcome Team and has produced a prototype of the assessment tool in electronic form; P2 leads the Sunday morning Emergency Medical Response team which is a team of medical professionals on call

during Sunday services; P3 has accepted leadership of the small group and has invited new members to participate. He has also trained an intern leader who formed a new group from the original group; P4 serves as co-leader with her husband and in children's ministries on Sundays; P5 has recently completed the training to become a small group leader and is now in the practicum portion of that training; P6 serves on the Sunday services presentation team. She also serves as the administrator for her small group.

Outcome Summary

The strongest sentiment during the discussion was the power of their relationships with Christ and with one another. The second most important factor in their spiritual formation toward maturity was the assessment tool and the intentionality toward growth it provided. The least effective factor was the goal setting process. The evidence suggests that the process was effective since nine of thirteen goals were accomplished. The subjective feeling of accomplishment needs to be improved. Participants suggested mechanisms were needed to serve as a reminder of set goals throughout the year.

The conclusion of the discussion time provided the most spiritually poignant moment of the evening. P1 described, with more emotion than he normally reveals, the day of his father's funeral. He was out of state and therefore without the support of the small group of people with whom he had become so attached. He was at the graveside contemplating his memories of his dad. The pastor, whose words had been adequate but unremarkable to that point, announced that he was going to read emails

that had come in from distant friends. He read loving and supportive emails written by members of the small group. At that moment, it was as if he and his wife were transported to the living room where everyone sat together. They wondered if, at any moment, the small group members would come across the parking lot. The profound sense of spiritual connection was truly life-changing.

The discussion time ended with a consensus statement from P5, “This is what it’s all about. We share our lives with one another. We’re here to share with one another and learn from one another. It is so powerful.”

Conclusion

The overarching conclusion reached is that spiritual formation happens in the context of Christian community. P5’s quote is perhaps the quintessential quote, “I remember the first night I was sitting there. I remember thinking all these people are strong Christians. I am so far over my head. Then I thought, Wait a minute, everyone has their little piece of them that doubts, or is unsure. I can tell you, if we didn’t do the group, we would have just been stuck, going to church on Sunday, walking away and going on like we were. It changed our lives tremendously. We would have been stuck. We would have never advanced to this point at all.”

CHAPTER 6

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research was intended to explore a pilot process designed to facilitate spiritual formation from conversion to fruitful maturity among a given group of participants. Special focus included the process of assimilation into the body of believers, the spiritual formation of those believers and the eventual discovery of the respective role of each believer in the body of Christ. This spiritual trajectory was intended to mirror the motif of *connect/being, grow/becoming, serve/doing*. The pilot process explored was the one currently used by Western Branch Community Church in Chesapeake, Virginia.

The primary significance of this investigation lies in its exploration into a holistic, systemic process for spiritual formation that encompasses both evangelism and discipleship. The uniqueness of the approach is demonstrated in the four primary planks associated with it. Those planks are a trust environment, an assessment process, a control mechanism designed to minimize the bias of self-testing and goal setting around specific Christian character traits. The approach also encompassed the stages of development within those character traits.

How the Research Was Done

Surveys were conducted among all willing participants of Western Branch Community Church. The goal of the survey was to determine a profile of the

“typical” WBCC member. Armed with that profile six participants were selected to participate in the pilot process for spiritual formation. Each participant was subjectively assessed to be at differing levels of Christian maturity ranging from pre-conversion to fruitful maturity.

Once selected the six participants formed a weekly gathering in one another’s homes. The gathering constituted a discipleship group that prayed, worshipped, studied Scripture and interacted biblically around personal spiritual questions. A wide range of curricula was used during the research period. It was theorized that a specific curriculum was not needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot process being explored. The six participants were not friends before the pilot process began. In time a deep personal bond of trust formed among them that has continued beyond the research period.

At the end of the first year of meeting together each participant completed a Christian Maturity Assessment and submitted to a control mechanism, termed an Affirmation Meeting. The conclusions reached from each assessment led to specific spiritual growth goals for each participant. At the conclusion of the second year together, each participant submitted to a subsequent identical assessment-affirmation-goal-setting process. The second year’s assessment included an evaluation of their effectiveness in accomplishing the goals set at the conclusion of the first year. The entire research process concluded in a focus group discussion designed to glean participant insights from the primary aspects of the two-year process.

The Information Gleaned from the Research

The following is designed to serve as a summary of the information gleaned from each aspect of the pilot process.

The Participants

All six of the participants were active attenders of Western Branch Community Church. They communicated that they enjoyed the Sunday services. They were complimentary of the overall ministry of the church. They expressed personal intention to continue attending the church for the duration of the two-year research period. Three of the six participants professed a personal relationship with Christ from the outset. Three expressed a desire to build their lives around a relationship with God, but did not articulate a conversion experience leading to a personal relationship with Christ.

Within the first few weeks the group began to form a deep bond. During the post-research focus group one participant expressed, “When we first started together we were unsure of the process and we didn’t really know one another. We didn’t have any idea of who one another was, and then we just started warming up and opening up and it just evolved into this community. I had never experienced any like that before. It all happened so easily, we all just blended so nicely.”¹ That sentiment echoed from every participant in the process.

By the end of the research period these six participants had formed such a tight community they decided to remain together. To do so in the context of WBCC,

¹ P2 stated this sentiment during the focus group discussion, attached as Appendix 3.

they transitioned into one of the church's Community Groups. One of the members of the group completed the training process and became the leader of the group. Today, new members have joined the group. Interns have been trained and additional groups have been formed from this original group.

The Sodality

WBCC's large group environment, termed the Sunday Celebration, was considered to be effective at introducing attenders to the personal claims of Jesus Christ. Statistical information gleaned from the WBCC administrative offices revealed that nearly 60% of the church's members have made their adult commitments to Christ at the church. They further revealed that a similar percentage were unchurched before coming to WBCC. It was also decided that spiritual formation beyond that point required a more intimate sodality where trust could be formed, questions answered and personal mentoring take place. It was decided that a range of curricula would be utilized during the months together. The goal of the sodality had more to do with answering the participant's questions and building a trust environment wherein honest personal assessment of Christian maturity would be valued and growth desired than with specific subjects covered.

The group met weekly for two years in one another's homes in a group facilitated by this researcher. A typical meeting included fellowship around the kitchen table, worship, prayer, bible study and discussion of personal questions from private devotions during the week. There was no attrition during the two years and very little absenteeism. When a group member was required to be away due to family

responsibility or illness, other members of the group would make contact during the week offering support and assistance where needed. During the two years this group of people stood with one another through personal loss of loved ones, personal illness, parenting crises and significant career decisions.

The Modality

The modality utilized in the pilot process had three primary elements, i.e. assessment, a control mechanism and personal goal setting. The following is a brief description of the dynamics of each area.

The Assessment

The assessment tool was immediately embraced by the group. They communicated genuine excitement at the prospect of having an objective means of measuring their current status in their spiritual maturity. The first round of assessments took place at the conclusion of the group's first year together. Participants are deemed to have made a sincere effort to minimize the bias often associated with self-assessment. Each participant acknowledged needed growth areas and seemed very comfortable to discuss those areas. It seemed they truly valued an honest look at their current, respective levels of Christian maturity. They genuinely wanted to know in which areas they needed to grow.

The second round of assessments took place at the conclusion of the second year together. Participants were even more motivated to complete an assessment. They communicated interest in seeing areas of growth from the previous year.

The Affirmation Meeting

The first round of affirmation meetings resulted in fairly significant changes in the scores achieved during the self-assessment alone. Several participants began the affirmation discussion with comments along the lines of, “I’m not sure I did this right” and “I think I scored too high.” Several of the scores did change during the course of the Affirmation Meetings. Each participant expressed an increased confidence in the affirmed outcome.

The second round of affirmation meetings, one year later, produced very few changes. It appeared that, as the participants matured, they also learned more about themselves.

The Goal Setting Process

The goal setting process was the weakest link in the pilot program. Each participant set specific personal growth goals at the end of each year. Each of the participants accomplished significant portions of the goals they set. However, all of the participants expressed disappointment at their lack of consistency in staying focused on their respective goals.

There was significant success. One participant had not shared her faith with an unsaved person for many years. During the period between assessments, she not only shared her faith, but was able to lead a new friend to faith in Christ. Today, she and her young daughter are building a friendly relationship with their unsaved neighbor and young daughter in hopes of leading them to faith in Christ, too. Another participant set a goal to read through the Bible and completed the entire Old

Testament during the year between the two assessments. All three of the participants who had previously struggled with making a statement of faith that declared a personal relationship with Christ now do so without hesitation. All of the participants moved from Sunday attenders of the church to active participants in many areas extending their influence and Christian friendship circles in the process.

Evaluating the Research Process

Coming to the end of a research project like this includes reflection on what might have been done differently. This project is no exception. Below are a few thoughts for consideration.

The Assessment Tool

The assessment process has great benefit to the believer. King David prayed, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalms 139:23-24). The Apostle Paul instructed us, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?” (2 Corinthians 13:5).

The particular assessment tool utilized in this process has the strength of having several layers of information to be gleaned, i.e. stages of maturity, Christian characteristics on which to focus, specific questions that can point to goals to be set for future development, etc.

The initial response to the tool has been favorable. The response has been so favorable that others are asking where they can secure copies for their given context. There is concern in the fact that the tool has not been subjected to rigorous academic scrutiny. That level of testing should take place before wide distribution is even considered. It is hoped that qualified persons will take on such a research project. If not, a team of experts will be recruited locally to do so.

The Affirmation Meeting

The affirmation meeting has great potential to minimize the bias often associated with self-assessment. Having a trusted person ask how one arrived at a given answer provides a powerful spiritual mirror. The danger is that affirmation partners have great opportunity to shape the responses of the recipients. Just as assessors have great potential for subjectivity, so do affirmers. Much effort went into avoiding the undue bias of friendship in providing affirmation for the participants in this study. It remains unclear whether that goal was met with success.

Training needs to be developed for those persons who will provide the affirmation process for others. Affirmation partners don't necessarily need to have a higher level of maturity than the assessor; however, they do need a healthy sense of boundaries. They need relative emotional and spiritual health to affirm another person effectively. They need to understand their role is not one of correction or challenge. Their role is to hold up a spiritual mirror with the intent of encouraging honest responses to the various issues being assessed.

The Goal Setting Process

Goal setting is a significant part of growth and development. If one never draws a target, one has no way of knowing whether the target was reached. The weakness of goal setting in the area of growth toward Christian maturity lies on both ends of the spectrum. On one end, goals must have a mechanism for accountability and support along the trajectory toward completion. Otherwise, they become nothing more than good intentions. On the other end of the spectrum, Christian maturity is not about checking off boxes and accomplishing tasks. Christian maturity is about who a person is and who they are becoming. The goal is not to accomplish certain things; the goal is to be like Christ. These two realities must be held in tension in any goal setting process designed to enhance spiritual formation.

The Post-Research Focus Group

The post-research focus group gathering was an exciting event. It was a time of reflection and celebration for everyone involved. The transcript attached as Appendix 2 only provides a glimpse into the dynamics of the evening. The evening included telling stories, sharing dinner and praying together. It was a congenial atmosphere in every way.

The above dynamic lends itself very well to a trust environment in which people let down their respective guards and open up to one another on an honest level. It does not lend itself to effective critique of the process through which they have just come. Every participant felt so personally blessed to have been a part of the pilot process, they found it difficult to examine the process critically. An attempt to

lessen the effect of that dynamic was made by developing questions that were very open ended and minimally directive. It needs to be acknowledged that critical reflection on the entire process needs to be done by persons viewing the process as objectively as possible.

A Critique of the Research

Given the opportunity to start again and given this vantage point, the same four primary planks would have been utilized in developing a pilot process for spiritual formation from conversion to fruitful maturity. The elements of large group inspiration, small group application coupled with assessment, affirmation and goal setting still resonate as the most effective motif in the context of WBCC.

There are changes that might have been made, given the opportunity to restart the process.

First, the assessment tool would have been tested more thoroughly before being introduced. There is no lack of confidence in the tool, but guiding people to maturity in Christ demands the utmost care. The sincere hope is that such research will be accomplished before the circle of use widens significantly.

Secondly, the curriculum for the small group was not deemed to be critical to the process. The goal of the research was to explore the efficacy of the four primary planks of the pilot process along the continuum of connect, grow, and serve. It was theorized this rubric could be utilized as the conceptual framework regardless of the curriculum selected. The data strongly suggests that significant spiritual formation did

take place in the lives of each participant in the study. However, it is believed that growth could have been even more significant if more intentionality were introduced to the educational part of the process. Since the completion of this research project, WBCC has developed a more systematic approach to the Christian education of its members.

Finally, it was determined from the outset that a small group of people who represented a typical profile of the WBCC congregation would be a part of the research project. It is believed that approach was effective. However, other approaches might have been taken. Instead of developing a typical profile, a representative from the various groups within the church, might have been selected. WBCC is a multi-cultural, multi-socioeconomic background, multi-generational congregation. This diversity was not factored into the original selection process. It is speculated that the results of the research might be richer if that diversity had been reflected within the group.

The Value of the Research

The primary value of the research lies in the fact that no such holistic system has been found in current literature. This research provides a glimpse into such a system creating an opportunity for further validation of the processes explored. Through this study, pastors and other practitioners in spiritual leadership now have the concept and constructs to develop guidelines for determining spiritual growth from conversion to fruitful maturity within their communities.

Each participant in the research project demonstrated significant spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity during the research period. The strongest factor in their growth was the commitment to a weekly time together devoted to building relationships with other Christians who desire to grow. It is concluded that a small cluster of fully-devoted followers of Christ, devoted to one another, can profoundly impact one another's spiritual formation toward fruitful maturity in Christ.

Participants also found the assessment tool to be a significant part of their personal growth. Each participant valued the assessment as a significant part of their growth toward maturity. It is accepted that the lack of rigorous academic testing of the assessment instrument lends itself to future validation. It is equally accepted that the validity and reliability of a numerical scale to determine stages of maturity needs further quantitative analysis. It is believed that the categories and numbers utilized require a separate quantitative study, which might include computer aided research utilizing software specifically designed for that process.

The intent of this investigation was an initial attempt to explore what happens when a small group of people come together over a significant period of time with the intentional goal of aiding each other toward fruitful maturity in Christ, particularly when a modality in the form of assessment, convergent validity and goal setting is included. That investigation was based on the belief that the taking of an honest, biblically-based look at where one is in Christ is critical to growth in Christ regardless of what aspect of Christian character is being assessed.

The goal setting process is a valuable part of the process. It provides specific areas in which participants may focus attention toward growth. All participants set

goals designed to facilitate growth. The commitment to those goals varied from participant to participant.

Some set goals and looked back at the year with a sense of accomplishment for having fulfilled them. One participant set a goal of finding her niche in the church family and serving. During the year she began serving in a range of areas. When the opportunity to lead the Emergency Medical Response Team came up, as a nurse she immediately saw that as God providing her a means to accomplish the goal. Other participants had trouble remembering, during the year, which goals they had set. Valid suggestions were made regarding mechanisms for keeping the goals in view throughout the year.

It has been concluded that improvement is needed in the area of increasing the value of the goal setting process. A system intended for ongoing support and accountability toward fulfilling those goals is also needed. One participant suggested the process become web based. Each participant would have their own password to allow private access to their current and past assessments, growth charts and goals. This would provide a means for comparison over the time and for encouragement based in demonstrated growth. Another participant suggested the goals be shared among their group members and accountability partnerships be formed. In both cases, ownership of improving this aspect of the pilot process has clearly been adopted by the participants.

Future Research

Replication, validation, related studies and furthering the current investigation within the local church are all issues relevant to further research on this subject. These will potentially increase the rigidity of the study and build upon the issues discussed here.

It will be of interest for others to replicate these case studies in other contexts to explore the potentially universal application of the findings. In addition, replication will add to the reliability of this research and further findings will shed more light on the topic.

Validation needs to be done on the measurement tool used in this study. This is a separate study, which can be accomplished through quantitative research and investigation. As this is a seminal work on the process from conversion to fruitful maturity the validated measurement tool will be seminal in the measurement of spiritual growth and maturity.

The next stage of research is being done among a wider audience within the context of WBCC. The purpose of increasing the sampling is to explore whether similar results will surface among a wider audience, in a less controlled environment than that of the original representative group.

In January of this year the Christian Maturity Assessment Tool and subsequent affirmation and goal setting process were introduced to the members of

WBCC active in one of the church's existing small groups.² These members were challenged to complete a personal assessment and to submit to an affirmation meeting with their group leader or an accountability partner within the group. They were further challenged to set goals for spiritual growth and to share those goals with their respective small groups.

One month later a survey was distributed among those members. Three hundred and ten adult congregants out of the 1,100 members currently active in one of the church's small groups responded to the survey. According to Dr. Thom Rainer in a congregation of more than four hundred a 15% response can be considered a fair sampling of the congregation.³ Three hundred and ten completed surveys from a potential pool of 1,100 respondents represents a 28.1% response. It is therefore considered to be a fair representation. The following is a table of the survey responses.

Table 5. Congregant Survey

Completed an Assessment	Submitted to Affirmation	Set Specific Goals	Found the process helpful
93.8%	76.1%	88.3%	88.3%

The average overall score reported by those surveyed was that of 157.9. This represents an corporate maturity in the young adult range.

The following year small group members will be led to complete a follow up assessment. The goal will be for respondents to compare their respective results with

² Western Branch Community Church is a cell-group based church with more than 80 small groups meeting weekly around the community. These groups are considered the basic family units of the church.

³ Rainer, Thom, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched* (Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI 2001), 259.

those of the previous year. Data will be gathered from those respondents with a goal of evaluating growth across the congregation. Data will also be tracked to determine whether there is general growth in the *being/connect/infant*, *becoming/grow/adolescent* and *doing/serve/adult* dynamics among the members. This data will be juxtaposed with the data gathered from the assessments to confirm or challenge those results.

Research is now being planned within the context of other congregations who embrace the above rubric for spiritual formation. It is hoped that the sodality and modality utilized in this research will be useful to practitioners in developing unique processes in their own unique context.

Conclusion

Arguably, the most significant contribution of this study to academicians and practitioners alike is a researched process of guiding individuals from conversion to fruitful maturity. For practitioners, the process may be adaptable to the various contexts in which they operate and for academicians, the study is founded on sound philosophy and theology, and therefore lends itself to further dialogue.

Another major contribution of this study is an introduction of a measurement tool to assist participants to ascertain the stage of development they may have achieved in their spiritual growth. In this study, the tool is used to measure growth towards a specific goal but it might also be used in hiring situations to determine

suitability for assuming the responsibilities in a given job, to ascertain the best role of an individual in an organization or just for personal growth.

The study implicitly questions the too-often-held-belief that people go to church to be happy and to be entertained. This study suggests a paradigm in which people go to church to grow towards maturity. It further suggests that maturity itself is not an end in itself. The goal of maturity is preparation for leading others to faith in Christ and assisting them in their respective growth toward maturity. It presents a view of a more serious approach to church life and encompasses issues such as accountability, responsibility, growth, maturity, soul winning and overall church development.

Ultimately this study suggests that evangelism and discipleship can co-exist in the same environment. They are, in fact, not in tension with one another at all. They are two parts of a holistic system of spiritual formation from conversion to fruitful maturity in Christ.

APPENDIX ONE

SURVEYS OF SELECTED PARTICIPANTS

Participant One

- 1. Were you unchurched during the six months prior to coming to WBCC?** Yes. I grew up in the Catholic Church, but never really felt a part. I dropped out when I went to college and never really returned.
- 2. How did you come about coming to WBCC originally?** My fiancé invited me. I started attending the church with her while we were still dating.
- 3. What were your first impressions?** A pleasant atmosphere, very different from the Catholic services that I had attended in the past. Interaction between the pastor and church attendees was something new to me. Lectures were founded on real family values and biblical examples taught in a relaxed atmosphere.
- 4. What were the primary factors in your decision to become a member of the church?** I realized that I needed a close relationship with God in order for my marriage to be successful. WBCC provides the proper setting and opportunity to further my biblical understanding, while surrounding me with others that have the same goal.
- 5. Are you willing to become a part of a small group, that will meet weekly, with the stated goal of helping one another toward Christian maturity?**

Yes. As helpful and relaxed as the services are, they don't give me the opportunity to ask questions and interact around the questions I have. As my new wife and I form our family, I need that.

Participant Two

1. Were you unchurched during the six months prior to coming to WBCC? Yes. I grew up in the Catholic Church but stopped attending church when I got married in 1982.

2. How did you come about coming to WBCC originally? In 1994, a friend in my neighborhood told me about WBCC. I felt like something was missing in my life and my marriage was in forward motion but very empty. I also really wanted my children to be involved in a church community as well. I decided one Sunday to go and see what the talk was all about.

3. What were your first impressions? My first impression was I loved the music and the upbeat service. I was a little uncomfortable with some people who prayed out loud and raised their hands while singing. My Catholic upbringing did not prepare me for this church. The sermons really hit way too close to my situation and feelings. I wasn't prepared to feel so emotional about the services. At times I had to stop coming to church because I couldn't stop crying during the services. Eventually I felt very comfortable and started attending regularly.

4. What were the primary factors in your decision to become a member of the church? I was attending church regularly and still felt like something was

missing. I realized one day I was one of those people who came every Sunday, absorbed everything but never made a contribution. I attended “First Steps” and really learned what the church was all about. It’s been a great journey so far!

5. Are you willing to become a part of a small group, that will meet weekly, with the stated goal of helping one another toward Christian maturity?

Yes. I love the church, but there are so many people here that I’ve had difficulty really making friends. I feel I need some close personal friendships with people who want help each other grow.

Participant Three

1. Were you unchurched during the six months prior to coming to WBCC? Yes. I grew up in an irreligious family. My father was agnostic and my mother to this day professes to be an atheist. I have attended church off and on with my wife who is a Christian..

2. How did you come about coming to WBCC originally? My wife and I were very impressed by the way the church rallied around our neighbor during a difficult time. Our neighbor invited us to attend with her.

3. What were your first impressions? My wife really liked the friendly, informal atmosphere and practical messages. From my perspective, after having attended several traditional churches, I was thankful she was happy with WBCC. I really liked the idea of being in a church that was seeking seekers like me!

4. What were the primary factors in your decision to become a member of the church? It took a long time for me to realize the importance of such a step. I enjoyed attending the services. I felt great about my family being a part of the church. I had no desire to seek another church for myself. Candidly, I relied on my wife's judgment in matters of religion/church. I now realize the real issue was not knowing where I was on the issue of my faith. My personal integrity would not let me fool myself or anyone else by going through the motions of the membership process. Then comes the call concerning the 40 Days of Purpose series which led to the possibility of this discipleship group. It was only then that I gave me life to Jesus. Then I wanted to be a member.

5. Are you willing to become a part of a small group, that will meet weekly, with the stated goal of helping one another toward Christian maturity? Yes. I have so much to learn and so much time to make up! The 40 Days of Purpose group experience convinced me that I needed a consistent small group experience in order to grow in my faith and become the spiritual leader my family has patiently waited for years for me to become.

Participant Four

1. Were you unchurched during the six months prior to coming to WBCC? Yes. I grew up in church and gave my heart to Jesus at a very young age. However, since moving to the area I had not found a church home that my unsaved husband was comfortable to attend with me.

2. How did you come about coming to WBCC originally? A neighbor of ours was a member at WBCC. When she went through gall bladder surgery I was amazed by the way WBCC rallied around the family. The members brought meals, sat with the kids, cleaned their house. I was impressed.

3. What were your first impressions? Having grown up in a Pentecostal environment, I was looking for a church where I could sense the presence of God. However, many of the Pentecostal churches we visited to too expressive in their worship style for my husband to feel comfortable. As soon as the service started at WBCC I knew I had found what I was looking for. I prayed through most of the service that my husband was feeling the same way.

4. What were the primary factors in your decision to become a member of the church? I enjoyed the services and found the teaching very practical and helpful. It was also very encouraging that my husband, for the first time in our 20-year marriage actually looked forward to attending services with me. I met with the Pastor to ask about the doctrinal positions of the church. When I found they were in line with my own, I immediately decided this would be my home.

5. Are you willing to become a part of a small group, that will meet weekly, with the stated goal of helping one another toward Christian maturity?
Yes. I have been a Christian since I was a little girl, but I've never been in a close knit group of Christians who are committed to helping each other grow. I believe a small group will help me to start growing again and perhaps give me a chance to help some others on their spiritual journeys too. I am especially hopeful that my husband will come with me.

Participant Five

1. Were you unchurched during the six months prior to coming to WBCC? Yes. I grew up in the Catholic Church but really only attended to appease my parents. As soon as I moved out on my own I stopped attending church except on special occasions at my parents' insistence.

2. How did you come about coming to WBCC originally? When I met my future wife we visited several churches in the area. There were all very traditional in nature. Not that there is anything wrong with traditional ways; however, we wanted to attend a church where the pastor presents the message and it seems as though he is speaking directly to you and drives the message home. After not having much luck finding a church we both like, my fiancé mentioned a church she used to belong to and we decided to visit WBCC.

3. What were your first impressions? The first time I visited WBCC, Pastor Jim Wall delivered his message and it was as though he was speaking directly to me. The atmosphere at WBCC was like one big family and he spoke of small community groups that rally around those in need of support and encouragement. This community group idea really interested me to be in relationships with those who have a relationship with God. WBCC gives me a sense of belonging and the one most thing is they want you to have a relationship with God.

4. What were the primary factors in your decision to become a member of the church? Immediately after the first couple of services I attended, my spirit inside me awoke. For the first time in my life I wept at every service for several

weeks. I was confused as to why I wept so, but really I think it was guilty feelings for not having a relationship with God earlier in my life. Also, it was a sign of happiness for me because I realized I missed out on the wonderful feelings I was feeling inside. I know my spirit has awakened for the very first time. After attending there a few months, we start the “Forty Days of Purpose Driven Life” Campaign and this changed my life forever. This experience for me lit a fire inside me that continues to burn today and always will. Another factor that made me join WBCC is soon after my father passed away, I was angry and did not understand why he suffered so because he was a servant of God all his life. But now I know why and WBCC has helped me find those answers.

5. Are you willing to become a part of a small group, that will meet weekly, with the stated goal of helping one another toward Christian maturity?

Yes. It was the small group concept that attracted me to WBCC after that first Sunday here. I look forward to the helping others grow in their faith as I grow in mine.

Participant Six

1. Were you unchurched during the six months prior to coming to WBCC? Yes. I had very limited church involvement as a child growing up in South Carolina. After moving to Virginia, I felt a strong desire to find a church home, but had not done so when I finally visited Western Branch.

2. How did you come about coming to WBCC originally? I had moved here from Charleston and the kids were about four and seven. Before we moved here I had visited a couple of churches and it was tugging at my heart that we needed to be in church. My marriage was falling apart at that time also. I got a flyer in the mail about WBCC which was meeting at the Middle School at that time. I drove through the parking lot one Sunday around service time to ‘check it out.’ Then, I came back the following Sunday and actually attended a service.

3. What were your first impressions? I loved that it was not ‘stuffy’ and the people didn’t seem to put on pretenses. I love the music. I felt the spirit in the room. I would almost get a chilled feeling with the hair standing up on my arms. The message was so ‘on time’ that it was almost unbelievable. It spoke to my heart and I cried during most of the services I attended. I got so much out of it and still do today.

4. What were the primary factors in your decision to become a member of the church? When my marriage failed I fell away, but I never lost that tug to be in a church. I visited several different churches in the area for the next couple of years, but never settled in any of them. When I started dating again, my fiancé was Catholic so we started looking for a church we could both feel a part of. We visited a Methodist Church and a Catholic Church. A neighbor was looking for a contemporary church and I told her about WBCC. I offered to visit with her and her husband one Sunday. I told my fiancé that he should go to see if he like the contemporary service. We stayed from that day on and attended “First Steps” within a year.

5. Are you willing to become a part of a small group, that will meet weekly, with the stated goal of helping one another toward Christian maturity?

Yes, my (now) husband and I are very interested in establishing our home on a Christian foundation. Neither of us feel spiritually mature enough to do that. We need help and would love to be a part of a small group of people who feel the same way.

APPENDIX TWO

THE CHRISTIAN MATURITY ASSESSMENT TOOL

The Bible calls us to be, not just believers in Jesus, but fully-devoted to becoming fully-mature followers of Jesus. The Bible also clearly presents that calling as a destination at the end of a life-long journey. This tool is designed to help you assess where you are in that journey and to isolate specific areas for your next steps toward becoming fully-mature in Christ.

Be sure to answer each question honestly, rating yourself on a scale of 1 to 5 as follows: **1. Almost Never, 2. Rarely, 3. Sometimes, 4. Often, 5. Almost Always**

Enter your responses in the first column beside each numbered question. The most accurate picture will come after you go over your responses with a trusted Christian support and accountability partner for consideration and affirmation. Enter the agreed upon responses in the second column.

If you don't understand a question place a 1 in the first column for that question and discuss it with your accountability partner.

1. ____ I have a willingness to seek advice from Christians more mature than myself.
2. ____ I am emotionally aware of the fact that Jesus died for my sin.
3. ____ I see the effects of God using me in ways beyond my ability.
4. ____ I recognize areas of my life where I need to grow to be more like Christ.
5. ____ I have a desire to meet the needs around me.
6. ____ I pray to know and love the Lord more intimately
7. ____ I do my part to ensure that my human relationships are healthy.
8. ____ I share my faith with the unbelievers I know.
9. ____ I pray about decisions before I make a commitment.
10. ____ I understand the Biblical principles of tithing and giving free-will offerings.
11. ____ I sense God's presence in my life.
12. ____ I stop and think about my words before I speak them.
13. ____ I am very knowledgeable on Biblical topics.
14. ____ I submit to those in authority over me without great stress.
15. ____ I thank Jesus for what He did for me at Calvary
16. ____ I pray to be filled with (empowered by) the Holy Spirit.
17. ____ I ask the Lord to reveal areas of my life in which I need to grow
18. ____ I know what my spiritual gifts are.
19. ____ I can identify areas of my life that have become more Christ-like this year.
20. ____ I have specific people with whom I have authentic Christian community.
21. ____ I cultivate friendships with unbelievers in order to lead them to Christ.
22. ____ I have a quiet time with the Lord.
23. ____ I give at least 10% of my income to the church.

24. ____ I recognize God's voice and follow His leadings.
25. ____ I refuse to engage in gossip
26. ____ I make my decisions from a Biblical worldview.
27. ____ I acknowledge that God is the source of all my talents and abilities.
28. ____ I am emotionally impacted by the needs of the people around me
29. ____ I pray with other Christians to be filled with (empowered by) the Holy Spirit.
30. ____ I set specific goals toward my own spiritual growth toward maturity
31. ____ I am serving in the niche God specially designed for me in His Body.
32. ____ I pray that Jesus will be Lord over every decision I make in life.
33. ____ I follow the Matt. 18 process when I discover conflict in my relationships.
34. ____ I pray with people to accept Christ as their personal Savior.
35. ____ I see my prayers answered.
36. ____ I can see specific blessings in my life that I attribute to being a giver.
37. ____ I am able to control my emotions even in the face of personal difficulties.
38. ____ I pray that the Lord will use my tongue for building others up
39. ____ I am confident I answer correctly when asked for answers to Biblical questions.
40. ____ I prayerfully accept the responsibilities associated with being a Christian influence in the lives of others.
41. ____ I pray that the Lord will break my will and remold me in His image.
42. ____ I challenge others to step out into areas that require Holy Spirit empowerment to succeed
43. ____ I help others to move toward maturity in their faith
44. ____ I help others discover, develop and use their spiritual gifts in the Body.
45. ____ I pray with other Christians to make Jesus the Lord of their every decision.
46. ____ I help others to biblically resolve problems in their relationships.
47. ____ I teach others how to share their faith with their unsaved friends.
48. ____ People seek me out to pray for them and I do so readily.
49. ____ I tell others about the blessing of being a tither.
50. ____ I help others believe God is in control even when they can't see it naturally.
51. ____ I role model careful speech for others
52. ____ I teach Biblical principles to others.

Compiling Your Score:

Step 1: Record your answer from the first column for each question, in the box below labeled with the corresponding number.

Step 2: Total each column, recording your sum in the lettered boxes at the bottom of each column.

Step 3: Add the totals from the lettered boxes across the bottom. Record the sums.

Step 4: Repeat the process for your second column answers.

Charting My Personal Responses: (The first column)

1-	2-	3-	4-	5-	6-	7-	8-	9-	10-	11-	12-	13-
14-	15-	16-	17-	18-	19-	20-	21-	22-	23-	24-	25-	26-
27-	28-	29-	30-	31-	32-	33-	34-	35-	36-	37-	38-	39-
40-	41-	42-	43-	44-	45-	46-	47-	48-	49-	50-	51-	52-
A -	B -	C -	D -	E -	F -	G -	H -	I -	J -	K-	L-	M-

My total is: _____

Charting the Results from my Affirmation Meeting: (The second column)

1-	2-	3-	4-	5-	6-	7-	8-	9-	10-	11-	12-	13-
14-	15-	16-	17-	18-	19-	20-	21-	22-	23-	24-	25-	26-
27-	28-	29-	30-	31-	32-	33-	34-	35-	36-	37-	38-	39-
40-	41-	42-	43-	44-	45-	46-	47-	48-	49-	50-	51-	52-
A -	B -	C -	D -	E -	F -	G -	H -	I -	J -	K-	L-	M-

My Total Affirmed Score is: _____

Graphing your score:

Step 1: Once you have completed the scoring tables above, circle the number on the graph that matches your total score for each column. Eg. If your total in Column A of your “Personal Response” chart is 12 then circle the number 12 in Column A on the graph. Then repeat the process with your affirmed score. You may wish you use a different color ink for clarity after graphing your results.

Step 2: Once all of your totals are transferred to the graph, connect the circles to reveal your graphs.

Humility	Brokenness	Holy Spirit Empowerment	Desire to Grow	Serving Heart	Pure Motives	Healthy Relationships	Sharing My Faith	Prayer	Giving	Faith	Careful Speech	Biblical Worldview
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19
18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18
17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17
16	16	16	16	16	16	16	16	16	16	16	16	16
15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14
13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13
12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12
11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11
10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7
6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4

Analyzing Your Affirmed Score:

Keep in mind that your current stage of development is not as important as the fact that you are growing. Maturity is defined as being at the appropriate level of development at each stage. So re-take this assessment at least once each year and measure yourself against your last assessment. If you are growing, God is honored!

Infant/Child 52-95

Teen 96-150

Adult 151-205

Parent 206-260

My Affirmed Score is: _____

Isolating an Area for Development:

Meet with your spiritual mentor to go over your results. For best results ask him/her to take the test with your maturity in mind. Compare and discuss the two sets of results. The most accurate picture is probably somewhere between your personal assessment and your mentor's assessment of your current maturity level.

Select one to three of the lower areas from your graph and work with your support and accountability partner to establish a plan for growing that area this year.

Record your Personal Learning Goals following the model below.

My Personal Spiritual Goals are:

Goal: (What do I feel called to accomplish? Goals be specific enough to be measurable in order to be meaningful.)

Objective: (Why am I committing to accomplish this goal?)

Means: (How do I plan to accomplish the goal? Include the person that will provide support and accountability for you.)

Date: (When do I project to have accomplished this goal?)

APPENDIX THREE

A TRANSCRIPT OF THE POST-RESEACH DISCUSSION

F: Alright, this is Jim Wall sitting with the six members of the representative group for the Spiritual Formation Toward Maturity process at **WBCC**... and...we're discussing 5 specific questions that ...ah...will help us to do a little post-group debrief on maturity and how it works... ah... and so we are going to just going to jump right in and start fielding these questions. It is free wheeling, there is no organization to it other than we are all gonna just jump right in and share what's on our minds and in our hearts and enjoy this time together rin the process.

F: So, question number on, in what ways did your being a part of this small group effect you? Who wants to start us off?

P6: Are you raising your hand? [Nervous Laughter]

P2: No I'm thinking.

P2: When we first started to together we were unsure of the process... and we didn't really know one another. We had any idea of how one another was.. .and then we just, I don't know, every time we met, we just started warming up and opening up and it just evolved into this community... this group that... I never had experienced any like that before. It all happened so easily, we all just blended so nicely.

P4: I also think that ah, you know... you form relationships with people in your life through various ways, through work, through ah neighborhoods and things like that, but we kinda came together through our church from all different walks of life and really formed close relationships unlike any other... at least for me... unlike any other that I have in any other area of my life. Began to think of the group more and more often. More and more I found myself thinking about you guys um through the week, wondering how you were doing... so really becoming close in ways that you don't become close with people you work with... or people in your neighborhood...

All: Yes, yes, yes...

P4: ...its more of a spiritual bond.

P3: Absolutely. And that translated for me personally...um... that venue, that that those relationships literally took me from living life in the dark...to living in the light. Literally... for me. So, it was absolutely profound for me. It was not just helping me to open up more with people, but um studying the Word together, realizing and exchanging the dialogue about the void that I had, you know, in my life and.. .and... and that some of you may have had in your own...and... what not... and sharing that

experience and not being ashamed to express that... turned the light bulb on for me. And being able to share that... and... and... and it brought quite frankly a lot of emotions to the surface for me that I could not share preceding that environment. It... it... I was not going to do that... whether it was pride or ego or whatever... the devil himself. Whatever it was, it was not going to allow me... prior to that, I just could not let you know who I was, I was not gonna have that. So it was very profound for me. It changed my life. It didn't just make life more pleasurable for me. It formed close relationship that quite frankly it changed my life.

F: If you don't mind me saying...I still remember sitting in my little den. We were singing, "Spirit Fall on Us" and the emotions got more than you were comfort to deal with...

P3: I will never forget...I was... I had no particular thought in my head. It washed over me. (Laughter... the Spirit fell – yes the Spirit fell) It was dramatic for me and I couldn't control it. I'll still... I'm getting teary eyed thinking about it. I will never forget that night. I will forget... I didn't know how to handle it, but I will never forget it.

P4: Yea, He still can't sing that song in group...

P3: I ... It is almost off limits. You know, [laughter]... It touches... and I remember following that later on... and... you know... Kim and her music... "What is it about music that the soul... what is it about that... and it quite frankly woke me to what is discussed on the news all the time about... you know... this music is affecting our children. Not that I disagreed with that point at all, but it really became profound for me... when that worship time brought it all home for me. I felt filled with the Spirit at that point. It was life changing for me quite frankly. I don't know if more years would have passed by without the small group setting, would I still be in search of... or for... you know... I don't know. But I'd been going to church a long time. I'd been going to this church for a long time. I'd been going to like to other churches with you know the years past too... not so much seeking as much as following my wife and realizing my children needed to be raised in church. And finding myself appreciating Christian values...the morality issues... that's always been big for me...before I gave my life to the Lord. But the small group setting fostered... opened that door for me somehow.

F: Let me inject quickly, in terms of an instructional thing. Don't be hesitate to use one another's names if that's more comfortable for you. I will replace the names in the transcript with participant one, participant two... OK?

P6: Believe me, its amazing how fast...and it was with our group, but I think it is with most groups, there's something about the setting and the format... how quickly people feel safe... you know to share and they feel loved. [yea, yeas] And they open up. There aren't too many people I've seen who don't do that after a short period of time.

P2: I think that's true. I just feel like [mumbling] I remember the first night I was sitting there... I remember thinking all these people are strong Christians. I am so far over my head. Then I thought, Wait a minute... everyone has their little piece of them that doubts, or unsure... or different walk...you know... But I can tell you, if we didn't do the group, we would have just been stuck... going to church on Sunday... walk away and go on... it changed our lives tremendously. [Rick yea] We would have been stuck. We would have never advanced to this point at all.

P6: We've talked about too... a lot of times we're so busy. It's hard to go. I just want a night to just sit here. But we get so much out of it...like such a re-charge and...I don't know... I don't know how people go without it. We've all said that to each other... "I really thought about staying home tonight, but I'm so glad I came."

P5: We felt more rested after we came that we did before.

P1: Like that pause in the middle of week.

P5: It is a peace.. and something that I need. To wait to just go from Sunday to Sunday... I need that Wednesday. And uh, to get in a small group setting... because I learn so much more from the lesson for that night and you can... a lot of interaction between us... we learn so much from each other... But I found that in the small group setting we get so much support ...um... with anything that may be going on in your life... if you're having a difficult time... or even a family member or a friend.. it's just awesome to see how everyone just pitches in...and uh, they want to help... show the love.

P1: You make a good point about the small setting. Turn the calendar back about a year or so. The group had grown really large before we birthed that last time, I think when we got so many folks involved, the intimacy... it wanes quite a bit, and, of course, after the group birthed and then it returned somewhat.

F: It does start to break down as the group gets bigger doesn't it?

P2: It's too busy and too chaotic and harder to bring up what's on...there's no time for them to share their story.

P5: Yea, connecting is harder...

P6: Yes, I think there is something about everyone participating when it's small.

P3: And feel comfortable to do so.

P4: We would leave group, when it got large, and we'd be a little grieved cause, we'd say.. you know... so and so didn't say anything tonight. That person usually says something, but they were quiet tonight.

P3: The group was 3 hours long... and you couldn't keep it going... the size is critical to intimacy.

P2: In terms of how to improve the experience I don't know we could...

F: Well, I guess you've said one of the ways... is by making sure it doesn't too large that intimacy suffers. Keeping it relatively small and intimate is far more powerful...

P2: Yea, absolutely.

F: Ok. Well, let's move on then to the next question. How was your growth affected by doing the assessment tool. I know it was a brand new experience for you guys, because you were the first ones.. the first people on the planet to do it. You were the guinea pigs... [laughter]

P6: I thought it was great. It really makes you think of all the different areas of your walk, you know.. and what you are doing and what you aren't doing.

P2: Yea, what you thought you were doing and not doing...

P4: It was informative, first of all

P5: very, yea)

P4: ...because... you know... "I'm a Christian." "OK, What does that mean?" Well, what does that mean? And when you go through the assessment tool it tells you what it means to be a Christian; all the different aspects. I think it brought a lot of focus to my life as a Christian. And I would find myself thinking, "OK, I need to work on this and this, OK. What am I going to do. I would see myself in a situation where I could say, "This is an opportunity to work that part." Then periodically I would ask, "How am I doing on that?" We were talking about that... one of the areas I needed to work on was witnessing to non-Christians... forming relationships with non-Christians. We would start looking for people in the neighborhood. "Let's try to talk with our neighbor." Maybe he could be one of those people we could form a relationship (laughter) we seriously talked about it all the time. (laughter)

P1: Let's talk to the heathens! (laughter)

F: Cause you do get to the place where most of the people you know, already know the Lord.

P4: Right

F: Your whole circle of friends, Christians at work tend to gravitate toward each other. In your case working in a Christian School...

P4: Oh yea...

P6: Yea, but its hard to want to be around people who aren't... because you see so many things... I just see everything so differently. We're studying and really learning what a Christian walk is... you really see, "Wow, I can't believe people think that way. I can't believe I used to think that way." (yea, laughter) There are so many changes about how to see things. So it's really kinda hard to make yourself be friends with non-Christians and really try to get close to them because... not that... not that you are better than them... but their thinking is so different.

P5: It's gets so hard to find common ground with them. Your values become so different... the things you enjoy become so different.

P1: When you do share the same common ground you find there is so much more cohesion in the group. I'll give you an example. A couple of weeks ago we went to lunch at Pizza Hut on a Friday, uh... bunch of guys on the management team. Everybody that went to lunch....all six of us were Christian. Here we are at the pizza buffet right there at the Naval Base... we all just bowed our heads in the restaurant and said grace. That is typically had not happened in the past when you are out with a work group and everyone is not a Christian. But when you are part of a big management team and you begin to recognize there is a sub-set of what's gonna on there, you find each other. You find yourself talking about the Bible...especially when you get a cross-pollination of other denominations. It's interesting. When you face difficulties you help each other. I think of the case of Mickey a couple of months ago...he came down with terminal cancer and passed away. There was a lot of conversations behind closed doors trying to figure out whether he was a Christian. We all wanted, very much to make sure he was ready. We tried to think of subtle ways, certainly a legal and proper way in a work environment to find out and to talk with him about it...

P3: The assessment tool in junction with the small group... um, they both need to be there. You know, the assessment tool can go into a church, but without the small group, its effectiveness could be somewhat limited. For example, since you mentioned Mickey there. When we discussed that in this group, we discussed all kinds of ways to reach...without over-stepping the position you hold as his employer... we discussed all kinds of ways to be Christians, to – we want to know He's saved. This is a big issue for me recently with my sisters' passing...and it hit me real hard one night and uh...

P1: It's a big deal!

P3: Yea. Right! THE deal!!

P4: The final deal! (laughter)

P3: That aspect of sharing your faith is on that assessment. This issue was very profound for you. I was obvious to us. You were um... struggling with how to do communicate on that and I learned a great deal from that for future use. So that tool in conjunction with the small group setting (P6: Right) helped us to discuss those points in some depth {P6: uh huh) so we could minister them as Christians in our communities the work place.

P2: yea, yea, it's all areas, we're not all strong in a given area... so in a small group we can help each other. I have my weaknesses, you have yours. I have strengths in one area, you have strengths in another. So in areas where I'm weak I find myself going, um... um... there's a question

P6: We draw strength from each other... and wisdom.

F: So how could do the assessment tool process be improved? Were there any negative experiences in doing it, confusions or ways it could be a better experience?

P4: I think it needs to be... we need to do it... set a time every year or every six months it needs to be a part of what you do in your life... part of your... you know... when you stop briefly to take stock of your life... I think that needs to be a big part of it...(yea, yea) and kinda continue to set goals and make goals. (Yea, Yea)

P3: Well, the accountability issue. We all... Jim you've said many times, you're gonna go on a diet, but you haven't told anybody, so if you fall off the wagon... you know...[you're good] well, with the assessment tools you go through the assessment and you set goals... for me, I need that accountability... someone to ask me regularly, where are you with your ... with this goal you've set. Where are you in that part of your...you know...that's where your goals should have been associated with where you need growth.

P2: Because change is hard... if you are held in accountability...it might be in an area... that you don't – you want to work on it, but you think, that's gonna be hard- we can think of every reason in the world not to do what you set out to do... unless you have some accountability. Wake up and realize, I still have not made that change in my life.

P6: You know, now that you mention it, maybe to build it into the group lessons, like every three months... you know... “How is everyone doing on their goals.” Because you do forget about it... I'll be honest. You get busy. Then when someone asks, “Oh, yea my goals! I haven't really worked on that have I? I totally forgot, so if you look at it every three months as a group... spend 10 minutes looking at our goals, thinking about how we're doing... {laughter)

P1: I'll give you a recommendation from a technical perspective. The tool needs to be automated...needs to be web based and it needs to store the results, password

protected. So you can call it and plot it over the years...your performance over the years.

P5: I was just thinking... the assessment tool you do it annually... the goal may be... where R and I did the affirmation together annually. But he and I could get together every six months... do a six month check. And you know, well, How you doing on your goals? and feed off one another.

P3: Like become partners in the process.

P6: Yea, I like that, I happen to find my old one and it would real interesting to lay that one beside the new one...I compared the results. It was interesting to see the difference.

P1: It will be interesting to see if other churches would plug into the web site to do this same process.

P2: Especially with the Acts 2 Network coming

F: It's coming.

P5: Provide complete instructions and guidelines added to the web...

F: Let's segue from that and talk about the affirmation meeting and the sitting down with somebody and going through your assessment with someone you trusted. How that feel when you first did. How was the experience of doing. Did it improve sharpen your focus, confuse your focus. Just all the aspects of the affirmation meeting.

P2: If I got a negative, I kinda found myself thinking, I don't think I did that. Then when you start bouncing it off of each other, they remind you of times you did. Then on the other side I might think I was stronger, but when I sat down with someone and they asked me to justify an answer...well you know... sometimes I couldn't and it made me think.

P1: The first time was the one I did with Jim.

F: Can you think back to that first one we did. Because I remember them quite well.

P5: Um hum. Yea.

P3: You know, some people, I'm kinda one of them... you have to sort of talk yourself through things.

P4: Verbal processor.

P3: Yea, that's it. Verbal processor. That's me!

P3: Poor Jim on that... I'd talk (lots of laughter – kept him til midnight uh?!) No, he was very patient with me. I know I kinda talked and answered my own questions some times... I was just sort of all over the place.

P2: You were a baby. You were a baby Christian.

P3: Yea, I was a baby. But what was important for me was a couple of things. One was trusting. There's got to be a high level of trust and, you know. I had to know there was a high degree of confidentiality. The reason I could do that was not just because I now live in the light, and I'll trust everybody – that wasn't the case. But there was a relationship that happened because of the small group... that, I mean I totally trust Jim. I can tell Jim the worst of me and I know that's not going anywhere. That was very important for me to be able to spill my guts and ramble on and on and on... because I wasn't worried.

P1: Almost like a mentoring relationship rather than an accountability partner where you are peers.

P5: Right. Yea.

P3: It took a long time, because I working through a lot of things. I don't how you saw it Jim, but that's how I felt. I was talking to you. I was talking to Kacee. I still do that. She still has to counsel me. The other night... last Wednesday night my back when out, she got me into bed. I start crying, it just hit me, my sister had died and I didn't know where she was [eternity]. She told me some things I didn't know. Why don't I know that? ... You know... Then Jim called, I had to give him the same story. [about his sister's conversion] because I'm still trying to figure out why I didn't know that. He gave me his perspective. I was still working through all that stuff. It is very important to have that level of trust where you can do that.. you can communicate. There can't be a wall up between you and the person you are doing the process.

P4: Let me tell you why you didn't know that. You didn't need it at the time before. You needed it at that point. Yea, yea

P3: Are you all talking about my private conversations with each one of you? [Lots of laughter, no, no]

F: Back to your original affirmation meeting though, I specifically remember you were quite hard on yourself. I had to do a lot of what you are talking about. You gave yourself a one, and I can think of a dozen example in the last thirteen days. Come on Vance don't beat yourself up so hard.

P4: He still does that.

P5: You did the same with me.

F: I did that with Jack too. In fact, I did some of that with all of you. In fact, Rick if you don't mind me say, I remember you coming in and saying, I'm not sure I am confident with the score I've arrived at. You kinda gave me permission to scrutinize your answers carefully. By the time we were done you were saying, "Yea that feels more accurate to me." And so I think in your case what I got from it, was the sense that you kinda needed that affirmation to feel like you came up with an accurate result. I don't even remember what the results were, but that dynamic gave you confidence. Do you remember that?

P1: Oh, absolutely. I agree with that.

P6: I think it does because there a lot of times when you read it and you score yourself. ...and... and... You don't necessarily give yourself credit for things you normally do. And so I think you have to have somebody that's gonna be honest with you. I felt that way with you, but when we started doing them with each other I felt I had to say, "Now, be honest." If you think it's lower, let's lower it.

P3: That honesty can hurt.

P6: Yea, but you need it.

P5: That's part of the growing process.

F: I've learned in doing these not to judge. It's not my job to judge, but if they gave themselves a three... Give me some examples. If they can't come up with any examples, then they are the one who say, I guess it isn't really a "sometimes" at all is it? Laughter, laughter

P5: Something I recall when Rick and I did our affirmation meeting together, he and I... some of the questions, we learned from each other. Because we shared our different points of view on a given question. It was another angle on the same question and opened up.. two for one kinda deal. "Oh yea, I didn't think of it that way." Helped a lot, we learned from each other during the affirmation... details came out.

F: Alright, we mentioned goals a minute ago... about following up. We talked about some way the goal setting process affected you. Are there any stories you can think of or events, or changes of heart that have come from setting a goal and then doing something about it.

P6: Even something as simple as I need to learn more about what the Bible says. I remember Kim saying, even getting a children's bible story book can be helpful. And I did that and it was. Then I got a family devotional book. We didn't do them every day like we were supposed to, but we did them a lot of times [nervous laugh].

P3: I set goals and failed at them. Quite frankly, my goals were... it was a Biblical Knowledge issue... the more I learn the more I realize I don't know, but I set a goal to read the Bible through from cover to cover in a year. And it was going so well. There was someone else in our group doing it with me. I bought one of those bibles where it's all laid out. But I was doing that with someone else in our group doing it. Every time we got to group we... the first we did was see each other. We'd see each other and know whether we were on track. Sometimes we'd ask how you doing... and find out he was ahead of me. I'd really get into to for a while, determined to catch up. (laughter) It was kinda like, when you read the Word you need to not just read it.. you need to get it in your heart, but I was determined to get through it. In time, both of us started falling short. Life got in the way, and I just didn't do it. I did it for several months, but I didn't stick with it. And I was reading the Old Testament! [Laughter]. Anyway...

[silent moment]

P2: I think one of the things for me,... I'd set a goal to take a CBI course... I always felt like I needed to find something I could do with in the church. Everyone was starting to find their place. You became a group leader and you joined the presentation team... I always felt like I needed to be more involved, maybe I do teen ministries... maybe... then the thing came up with the Emergency Medical Response Team and I was so excited, I thought I can do that. The light came on. I found my niche. So I kept seeking that out... and I just needed to serve.

P3: You were the answer to Steve Davidson's prayers.

P2: He was excited about me. [laughter]

P3: He was, he was excited. The day before... It was a Monday. I was talking to Steve and that came up... it was really on his mind. I've got all these people. I need someone to step up [to lead]. I don't know what to do. Maybe I'll create a dual leadership thing so two people can work together. Then the next day he sent me this email saying, "By the way, Cathy is stepping into the role." I'm like... I was able to say you've got it made now. She'll be dynamite.

P2: He was happy. He gave me the papers... Here you go [laughter]

F: I gather you hadn't even launch the ministry, and you had an emergency this past Sunday. Perfect timing.

P2: Yea. Perfect timing. It was just a nose bleed, but clearly, it brought to the surface what improvements were needed. I told her, "You are my guinea pig. Nice lady. Spent two hours over there with her talking with her. We really appreciate you have a small little emergency to enlighten us into where we need to make improvements already. But it was nice, I felt like finally I was doing something. You know... so...

F: Something very important.

F: Any other goal setting stories? Kacee you had a story from the first one we did.

P4: Yea, one of the goals I had set was to try to... unsaved friends... and ... and... to try to form relationships with unsaved people to bring them to the Lord. I had told you that one person I knew was Katie's baby sitter. And um... you know, you set goals and you think, OK well, I'm sure I'll find some way to do to. But just a few weeks her daughter came to church. Margie was the babysitter's name. I had been bringing her bulletins from the church, telling her about things that the preacher preached.. .and low and behold her adult daughter was the one who got interested. She asked about church, came and got saved. She actually came a couple of times to our community group and enjoyed what she had found... eventually her husband was not supportive and so it's been difficult for her, but it was amazing. But it was amazing. I remember Katie at the same time, we were making pledges to build the new facility, Katie came home and emptied her piggy bank into the brick she got at kids church. When I asked her what she was doing she said, "I want to build a big church so there will be enough room for Olivia [the baby sitter's grand daughter] to come to church." For me it was God saying, you set the goals and your sincere in your goals and I'm gonna help you do them.

My neighbors don't know it yet, but I'm working on them now. (laughter). I was telling Katie just the other day... the little kids that live next door to us. They don't go to church anywhere. We kinda take their kids under our wing. They are nice people but they are rednecks, for lack of better term... with a huge Rebel flag in their garage...

P1: Hey, I got one in my garage, so what? {laughter, chatter}

P4: You know what I mean! It was a beautiful day one Sunday in February, it was 75 degrees. So I decided to take Katie and the neighbor kid to the park. By the way, don't take kids to the park on a warm February Sunday... every other kid in Portsmouth is there! But anyway, Katie asked her, "Savannah, are you a Christian?" "Yea. What does that mean?" It means you love God." "Yea." "Well, how about your little brother. Is he a Christian?" Here she is in the back seat witnessing. [laughter] "We're thinking, you go girl!"

P3: We get back Katie says to us, "Savannah's not just my friend, she's my sister in Christ."

P5: Wow. That's cool.

P4: That just thrilled her. This is a 6 year old! So we are talking about that and so I started talking to her about coming to church with us one Sunday and we're working toward that. But, it's all a part of the goals I set, how long has it been, two, two and half years ago?! You know before hand I probably would have had my blinders on...

been nice to my neighbors, but I never really had added that next step of actually trying to win people to the Lord. So...

F: How about the other aspect of the assessment tool; the infant, adolescent, adult, parent kinda growth trajectory. Was that new information? Did that affect your thinking at all. How does it impact your growth toward maturity, or does it?

[Silent moment]

P4: I think it lends itself to a sense of responsibility. If you find yourself in a parent role...there is a responsibility that comes along with that.

[Silent moment]

P6: I thought it was scary. You know to... I can't remember, but I thought I was the infant [nervous laugh] or less... what was the lowest? [laughter]

P1: The unborn. [laughter, chatter]

P5: Embryo?! [laughter]

P6: ...but to me... I thought it was a little scary that it was higher than I thought it would be.

F: So have you seen movement since you took it the first time? Is the chart staying the same... going down... going up. What's going in terms of your maturity level.

P6: Oh my goodness. Yes, their increasing.

P5: Yea. In maturity? Oh yea!

P1: Absolutely.

F: So you're overall numbers are increasing, decreasing, staying the same?

P3: They've increased. And a great deal from the responsibilities that I've accepted as a result of it. Becoming a leader... I hate to use this, but it forces growth.

P6: Yea, it does!

P3: It really does. It mandates it. It.. it... because there are issues of growth of your group, they are growing and... you know... you want to stay par with them, anyway. There is exposure to the Word... exposure to other Christians and their troubles, successes... then handling and dealing with issues that you would probably tend to run from if you weren't in that role. So growth will take place...if you... and we all, as Christians, have responsibility for leadership in the body somewhere. And it's

pretty much the ultimate, from my perspective, to grow...is by taking some kind of leadership role, where you have the responsibility...the major responsibility is to increase spiritual growth among your people.. and...and... it's kinda of a humbling task. But it in the process... not to try to sound selfish, but you are benefiting like you wouldn't believe. You are gaining benefits... you're raking it like you wouldn't believe, you don't even realize it sometimes, but you are raking it in.

F: Isn't it a lot like natural parenting. It makes you grow up because you got kids watching now. You get the joy of watching them discover new things and its almost like you get to discover them again. It really is parenting. Every one of us know what it's like to be responsible for somebody and not feel qualified to do it, but here we are.

P4: That's true.

P2: The analogy for the infant, the adolescent, the adult, and the parent is a very good analogy. It is very good.

P3: I'm with Cindy though, it is a little intimidating. The terminology is a little intimidating. Because if you get to parenting...that's not just a word... there is responsibility that goes with it that's leadership. If you take it seriously and we do... we should. So...

F: One of the things... the dynamics that often happens with tools like this is that uh, the less mature you are, the less you know about what you don't know, and so you tend to rate yourself high. The more mature you are, the more you know about what you don't know and you tend to rate yourself low. Have any of you have any experiences like that, or did being together help you not to fall into that trap?

P3: I want to just kinda reflect on that subject. Reflect back, Steve was preaching for you one day.. and I am so glad he said this, I forget the context of why, but he said, "I recommit my life every day, or every other day." I thought...I mean...you too!? But really... [laughter]

P2: We're not that different.

P3: Yea. Because... and I'm glad its OK to have doubts. Yea, you find yourself being hard on yourself.

P2: You think, "I ought to be there by now."

P1: Or you think about how you handled a situation and you think, "That wasn't too Christian-like of me was it?"

P3: Yea. Yea. That has been a dramatic change.

P1: Although, Cathy has made it tough... she put that fish on the back of the car.
[laugh]

P6: What?

P2: The sign of the fish, Christian symbol.

P6: Oh, yea. [laughter]

P1: That's pretty rough stuff there. You can't cut anybody off in traffic anymore.
[laughter] Got to drive the speed limit. [laughter]

P2: In some areas... helps to remember who I am and makes me feel good. Thank you Lord I didn't say anything wrong or cut anybody off. [laughter]

P6: I think what you are saying... the affirmation meeting kinda levels that out.

P5: It does take some of that out because somebody's gonna ask you how you arrived at that answer.

P6: Or if you rated yourself low, then you get the examples and you move it up a bit or if you are too high, you get that honest affirmation person and you move it down some. [laugh]

P2: Alright, I'm lower than that. [laughter]

P4: I think two things. Number one, if you are even on the scale that's good thing, because you have a relationship with Christ. [yea, laughter] and Number two it is not something to beat yourself over the head with. OK, where am I? You go to the doctor and you go, OK, Where am I? What do I need to do? You don't have to stay where you are, you can change, you can grow. It brings a lot of focus to that. That's what I found, the biggest thing for me was the focus on where I needed to work. It was good. It was also good to hear how you appear to others. I may think I am appearing like a Christian, but am I really? I may be a certain way, but and am I living it loud enough to be seen or hear? So when you have the affirmation meeting and someone says I see that in you, it is affirming. I still remember things you said to me, You know what we went through in Brandon's senior year. I said to you, I don't know if I can ever forgive that person. And you looked at me and said, I know you. And I know that you will. I know who you are. You don't know how many times I hung on that...as mad as I was and as bad as I felt, I'm gonna forgive them, because Jim said, That is who I am." [laughter] It's true.

P1: Of course, we all think you've got a halo above your head. [laughter]

P4: I do not. That's Brandon. [laughter]

P3: I know better [laughter]

P4: Wait a minute, you stop laughing Vance, [laughter, chatter]

F: So what else can you tell me about this experience; anything at all about the small group, the assessment tool, the affirmation meeting, about goal setting. Anything that's happened in your life because of the time we've had together.

P5: I'd like to say, a lot like Vance, I was very immature um, as a Christian, coming into this small group setting, not knowing what to expect – what it was going to be like. If you'll recall, there was one group night it was like the light bulb came on. Cause... as my relationship with Christ grew... I mentioned to ya'll... now when I am at work...other Christians... they sensed what I was experiencing and it's like... I see them as Christians and they were coming up to me, and here we were engaging in conversations and I was full of questions. I had shared with others at work about what we talked about at group – we just had an open dialogue about it. And for non-Christians -- I found it -early on- it was hard to communicate with those folks. I don't know how to communicate with them now but I do with Christians. I don't if ya'll remember that [yea, sure], but that was a early experience that was profound for me. The small group... really has been profound for me.

P3: I second that.

P4: I think there have been times when this group has... saved my life. Whatever we were going through. Whatever we were experiencing... a lot outside of group. You come in here and it's like a warm hug... I don't mean to be corny, but that warm hug gives me to the strength to go out again and face the world. Your family can do that, but when I'm down I have to be careful, because if I go to him, I know its gonna bring him down to. But I can come to you guys... and you can listen and hug me and tell me it's gonna be OK in so many words... and it is.

P2: It grounds you.

P4: It does. Absolutely. You know, this is just a safe place to be whoever you are and bring your concerns.

P2: It's almost like... we were talking about .. you know... how we did during our divorce or how we handled different situations. But now that we are Christians and there such a sense of peace that comes. The whole world can be falling apart and thinking gosh, I'm right in the middle of and ... and now... you can just think, There is a higher power... I am not in control here, He is. That's the biggest thing I learned, I am not in control and its OK There is no sense in keep hitting that brick wall.

P6: You don't have to try to be.

P2: That's it, I don't have to try to be. When you try you just exhaust yourself. Your stressed. But... even though it's a bad situation and you have to deal with it, but it's just different in how you deal with things...

P3: You are still stressed. But it's not the same. Stress with comfort

P6: Right.

P2: Yea, you just resolve it in a different way. You just...

P3: And you know that the stress your gonna go through is going to result in some growth for you.

P2: You look beyond it... instead of poor pitiful me.

P3: Instead of this part of my life is miserable...

P6: You try to look for it.

P3: Yea, you actually look for it.

P6: Lord, what am I learning here? [laughter]

P5: I don't want to take this test again! [laughter]

P6: I can't remember what situation we were going through, I think it was during the construction and the problems with this house... We said, We have got to handle this the right way... because I don't want to do this again!? [laughter]
[Chatter, laughter]

P6: But its ah... we've talked about this before, about how safe it feels in your group to share and be lifted up and reminded of everything. At one time we talked about how it almost becomes closer than your real family... and... that's a strong statement when you first hear it and especially when you are an infant. Wait a minute. Are you trying to replace my real family here?

P2: What is this a cult? [laughter]

P6: Yea. Exactly. But it is so true. Because if you have people in your family who are not Christians.. [cell phone rings] they are not as comforting.. they are not as there... they are not as... all of that... They don't share your values. It's true.

P2: I have to say for myself. This group...you know... you know... when I was in the hospital, you guys were there. It was like you just picked it up [snap fingers]... supporting doing whatever you could.

P6: When we've had children issues. We've been there for each other.

P1: I can think of the most profound experience for me was when we buried my Dad. I was at graveside and the Pastor pulls out an email from you, and Vance and from you as well. It was like, you guys were 1,000 miles away from therein my moment of need and you were there for me.

P2: That was powerful. I get chills when I think about it.

P1: You don't understand you just weren't there.

F: But we've all been in those settings... its almost like you get zapped back to the living room ... even though the geography is not there... it's like you're sitting among the people you love and who love you.

P2: That was the part where Rick just went... whew. Those words came off of the paper and you could feel the tension flowing out of us. It was one of the most powerful things I've ever been through. The need was there... That's the part where Rick just relaxed... he had been asked to do something, but he was too emotional to do anything. But when he pulled out this piece of paper and started reading... it was like the pressure just released.

P1: You can't imagine. Let me try to paint a picture for you. Here we are in a small town in upper Michigan. There's a lot of folks I'd never met. My Dad retired there and so he met a lot of local people that I didn't know. My family is there. You're standing graveside. There's this ... you know...hole in the ground at my feet. There's my Dad's casket right in front of me. Of course, Cathy is standing right beside me... and some immediate family. Here you only have a few moments – at that point in time.. you are either going to say something before they put that casket in the ground or that moment of opportunity will be lost. And... I brief a lot of people... I brief people with stars on their shoulders all the time, and I never ran into a situation where I didn't have anything to say... like it was at that moment. Here's this pastor that I didn't know from Adam. I had just met him in the parking lot... I liked the delivery and then all of a sudden he pulls out this sheet of paper and says, I'd like to add this. My ex-wife even had something in there. That was...

P2: Then he reads Vance and Kacee Griffin and Pastor Jim Wall. It's like we're looking around... Oh, my gosh. Where are they? [looking around] Are they here! It was amazing! Wow! It almost felt like you were gonna pile out of car and start waving any minute.

P1: Thank you so much.

P4: You are welcome. You would have done the same for us. When we are not together, we miss your faces.

[warm chatter. Laughter]

P1: Not to mention some pretty robust conversations about the Bible in this group.

P2: I remember one group, he pulled in what the lesson was, but we incorporated it into a problem we had in the group. We didn't read it verbatim... but we covered the topic in the real life situation.

P3: Sometimes you gotta put it down and minister to each other.

P5: This is what it's all about. As things come up... We share our lives with one another. We here to share with one another, learn from one another. So... that's very powerful.

F: Alright guys, Thank you guys for taking the time to do this.

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